

Susana Vega-González

## Metaphor and Symbolism in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

Nation exists only where we create boundaries. My nation lives in the waters between  
spiritual and physical homes.

Miriam Neptune, "In Search of a Name"

For after every night must come the dawn, a dawn that will take us not only midstream  
but all the way to the other side, away from the fires and the coals and hopefully toward  
more solid ground.

Edwidge Danticat, Foreword to *Walking on Fire*

In *The Farming of Bones (FB)*, the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat engages in a "psychohistorical re-membrance" (Holloway 101) of the infamous Haitian massacre of 1937, where the living became dead and the dead lost their names and faces. Danticat's narrative act is thus an attempt to honor the thousands of unburied victims by rescuing them from oblivion and providing them with lasting memory rendered through their literary inscription. As Karla Holloway aptly states,

just talking (telling) seems to be the way for memory and time to work out some sort of textu[r]al truce. History is reconstructed within such a frame and the writer is able to write out of a matrix of memory that is both sensual and visceral, as well as to reconstruct a logic of repetitive, circular complexity rather than a binary and linear polarity. (108)

Metaphor proves to be not only a signifying element in *The Farming of Bones* but also the structural foundation of the whole novel. Taking the cue from the oral stories about the Massacre heard from her foremothers or "kitchen poets" in what Paule Marshall calls "the wordshop of the kitchen" (35), Danticat weaves her particular "textu[r]al truce" to preserve a part of history in the collective memory against the ravages of time. So pervasive is the use of metaphor in the narrative texture of this novel that it calls for a detailed critical study, which I attempt to undertake in the present essay.

From the very title of the novel, which alludes to the toughness of the cane workers' tasks, to its last pages, metaphor stands out as a literary device employed by the author "to yield some true insight about reality" (Ricoeur 141, qtd. in De Weever 61), a reality whose

overwhelming nature often surpasses the delimitations of the logically explicable. The Massacre River has acted as the dividing border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti within the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, a border which many Haitians crossed over the years in search of jobs and opportunities. The need to earn a living as sugar cane cutters, construction laborers, and workers on tobacco and coffee plantations forces many Haitians to keep crossing the infamous border even nowadays, despite the fact that “prejudice against Haitians among many lighter-skinned Dominicans has become commonplace” (Arthur 13). However, during the regime of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, Haitians were used as scapegoats and blamed for the precarious economic and employment situation. Obsessed with the Hitlerian idea of racial cleansing, Trujillo ordered the killing of Haitian cane laborers in the Dominican Republic in a massacre to be known as “The Cutting” (“El Corte”), which took place in October 1937.<sup>1</sup> The dead bodies of many of those slain near the border were thrown into the waters of the Massacre River, which from then on remained in Haitians’ collective memory as a metaphor of both death and eternity, both pain and yearning to give proper burial to the beloved, as Danticat demonstrates in her novel with clear Morrisonian undertones.

Like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Amabelle’s story is one of grief and loss, it is the narrative of a continuous search for the victims of historical injustice and violence lost in the coldness of water, be it a river or an ocean. And, as in *Beloved*, those silenced long ago are now granted a redemptive voice in literary discourse, as Amabelle admits: “It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside” (FB 266). Thus, the novel turns into a “safe nest” (FB 266) for those dispossessed because of their race, gender and/or class, a true haven where they can be paid homage and recovered from past oblivion into present remembrance.

In his introduction to Edouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, Michael Dash argues that

Landscape in the imagination of New World writers... translates the intricate and polysemic nature of collective experience... New World landscape offers the creative imagination a kind of metalanguage in which a new grammar of feeling and sensation is externalized. The artist must translate this multilingualism into his work. (xxxv)

The land, nature and the natural elements of water, air, and earth are crucial forces in *The Farming of Bones*, which determine the state of mind and existence of the characters as much as they shape the way the characters express themselves. It is not by chance that the

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting analysis of the Massacre and the circumstances that surrounded it see Wucker.

metaphoric content of *The Farming of Bones* revolves around nature almost in its entirety. Likewise, comparisons with natural elements abound in the novel, whether to express the female protagonist's strong love for her lover or to refer to the missing graves from the Massacre:

I am afraid I cease to exist when he's not there. I'm like one of those sea stones that sucks its colors inside and loses its translucence once it's taken out into the sun, out of the froth of the waves. (FB 2)

I could no more find these graves than the exact star that exploded and fell from the sky the night each of them perished. (FB 265)

Nature is revered by the characters and it often turns into an ally, a protector and source of strength amidst their misfortune: "making of the earth a warm bed" (FB 257), "I'm one of those trees whose roots reach the bottom of the earth. They can cut down my branches, but they will never uproot the tree. The roots are too strong, and there are too many" (FB 212). Furthermore, trees are associated by Haitians with the spiritual concepts of immortality and perdurance, and they represent a source of spiritual empowerment and resilience, all of which stem from the realm of the ancestors (Thompson, "Kongo" 172). Like the roots of the tree, ancestral bonds and the collective memory of a people serve as foundations on which ethnic identity is built.

Water metaphors recur throughout *The Farming of Bones*. Their connotations can be traced, once again, to Haitian Africanisms perceiving water as a "gateway" separating the world of the living from that of the dead (Thompson, "Kongo" 173); hence water's close connection with the spirits and the ancestors. Amabelle's childhood is dramatically marked by the Massacre River since it was in its waters that her parents perished while the three of them were trying to cross over onto Dominican territory. The memory of their death and the destructive connotations of water will haunt Amabelle in the recurring nightmares and dreams interspersed in her narrative. The manifold associations that images of water conjure up in the text render a dualistic metaphor of both healing and destruction. While on the one hand they are constantly associated with drowning and death, they are also used as a metaphor of love, protection, and immortality. When she is by herself, Amabelle takes out a symbol of permanence, a conch shell her lover had given her "saying that in there flowed the sound fishes hear when they swim deep inside the ocean's caves" (FB 45).<sup>2</sup> The meta-

<sup>2</sup> Conch shells are commonly used in Haiti to ornate graves and are considered symbols of immortality. As Robert Farris Thompson is told in an interview with the Haitian priest and painter André Pierre, "shells symbolize the existence of spirit in the sea: the body is dead but the spirit continues on its way. The shell encloses

phor of the sea cave with connotations of motherly protection reappears in subsequent episodes, like that narrated by one of the characters who flees for the Haitian border when he is being persecuted by Dominican soldiers and civilians. Forced to choose between being killed by them and jumping off a cliff, he flies into the air to become one with the water and finally take refuge in a sea cave, which protects him from peasants with machetes in their hands waiting for him and the others to come out of the water.

One victim of the massacre is Sebastien Onius, the narrator's lover, and it is upon him that she centers her story. Sebastien's disappearance in the turmoil that leads to the massacre leaves Amabelle in a state of despairing uncertainty and confusion about his whereabouts, her only hope being the embracing and healing nature of water:

Perhaps there was water to greet his last fall, to fold around him and embrace him like a feather-filled mattress... His name is Sebastien Onius and his spirit must be inside the waterfall cave at the source of the stream where the cane workers bathe, the grotto of wet moss and chalk and luminous green fresco – the dark green of wet papaya leaves. (*FB* 282)

According to Mircea Eliade, caves are the settings of many initiation rites since they are symbols of the womb of Mother Earth, where the novice returns to the embryonic stage to be re-born (58). Likewise, water is used in many ritual practices to convey spiritual renewal. Even in the light of an almost secure death, Amabelle chooses to imagine and remember Sebastien in terms of a new life into which he must surely be born. The constant movement of water and its fluctuating consistency makes of it a metaphor of transition between worlds and it becomes the realm of ghosts and spirits, the final grave of the dead. Water turns out to be, therefore, a source of life out of death.

As a Haitian woman in the "Dyaspóra," Edwidge Danticat is highly concerned with identity politics and the process of self-formation of those living in an ideological "floating homeland" which links all Haitians from the "dyaspóra" (Danticat, *Butterfly's* xiv). This concern applies in *The Farming of Bones* to the dispossessed low-class Haitians who work on cane plantations in the neighboring Dominican Republic. The rejection and hostility they fall prey to because of their darker skin and their foreign condition give rise to a deep feeling of uprootedness, which Sebastien resents: "Sometimes the people in the fields, when they're tired and angry, they say we're an orphaned people... They say some people don't belong anywhere and that's us. I say we are a group of vwayajè, wayfarers" (*FB* 56). This

elements of water, earth, and wind. It is a world in miniature. It symbolizes the animation of succeeding generations by the spirit of the ancestors. It indicates the island in the sea to which we all shall journey" ("Kongo" 173).

consciousness of belonging to different places and not belonging anywhere at all triggers the need to set out on a continuous journey in search of an identity and a place to belong. Once again, Danticat appropriates the symbolism of water as a metaphor of home to signify both the unstable condition of Haitians' vital experience and the identification with nature as a way to fill that identity gap. Amabelle's thoughts delve once more into the healing power of water as the spiritual ointment needed to heal the wounds of dispossession and oppression:

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.

Of all the people killed, I will wager that there were many asking like me "Who to?" Even when they were dying and the priests were standing over them reciting ceremonial farewells, they must have been asking themselves, "Go in peace. But where?"

Heaven – my heaven – is the veil of water that stands between my parents and me. To step across it and then come out is what makes me alive. (*FB* 264-65)

From an early age Amabelle is attracted to streams, rivers, waterfalls, and it is in the mirror of water that she constantly looks for her face, an act which symbolizes her search for identity. Similarly, her motherlessness, a recurrent circumstance in many works by Black women writers, is somehow compensated by a close identification with mother nature and, especially, with water elements. Years after the massacre, around the time of the year when it took place, Amabelle goes back to the house where she used to work as a servant and on the way back decides to stop near the border, where the river is, for the sake of a commemorative encounter with the living spirits of the dead: "Every now and then, I'm told, a swimmer finds a set of white spongy bones, a skeleton, thinned by time and being buried too long in the riverbed" (*FB* 308). Her final re-union and fusion with the river points to an ambiguous open ending, where once again life and death coalesce and where we could read the protagonist's spiritual re-birth through her physical death which brings about the longed-for meeting with her parents and Sebastien, all resting in the river. As naked as a newborn baby, Amabelle slips into the embracing water, "cradled by the current, paddling like a newborn in a washbasin" (*FB* 310).

The whole metaphoric framework built around the image of water draws on West African cultures, which worship rivers and water spirits. Indeed, there is enough evidence in the novel to suggest that Amabelle represents the Yoruba orisha Oshun, the deity of love and rivers, deliverer of babies and guardian of twins (Neimark 140, 108). In her delivery, Señora Valencia is helped by Amabelle, who inherits from her parents the knowledge and practice of childbirth: "Births and deaths were my parents' work. I never thought I would help at a birth myself until the screams rang through the valley that morning" (*FB* 5). Significantly

enough, it is in the birth of twins that she assists, although one of them is doomed to die. The placement of this scene at the beginning of the novel anticipates the impending death of another twin, namely Haiti. This country and the Dominican Republic are the twins fighting for survival on the same island, even at the expense of the other's life. As the guardian of twins, Oshun, embodied in Amabelle, grants the dead twin the grace of memory and passes on the story of its suffering. From her union with Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning, Oshun herself gave birth to twins: "Oshun was once married to Ifá but fell into a more passionate involvement with the fiery thunder god... she bore him twins and accumulated... money and splendid things galore.... When she died, she took these things to the bottom of the river. There she reigns in glory" (Thompson, *Flash* 79). In her final visit to the Massacre River, Amabelle is accompanied by the insane professor who was the living example of the legacy of such a historical ordeal. His words, "Grass won't grow where I stand" (*FB* 285), imply that he is a river god or spirit, and it is he whom Amabelle asks for guidance when she goes into the river:

A shadow slipped out of the stretch of water before me, a ghost with a smile on his face... It was the professor... I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the fog, the dense mist of sadness inside his head. Would the slaughter – the river – one day surrender to him his sanity the same way it had once snatched it away?

I wanted to call him... I wanted to ask him, please, to gently raise my body and carry me into the river, into Sebastien's cave, my father's laughter, my mother's eternity. But he was gone now, disappeared into the night. (*FB* 309-10)

In her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Vashti Crutcher Lewis points out that "in traditional West African culture... lunatics were treated with awful respect, since it was believed that they were nearest in contact with the unseen spiritual world, and that the ancestral spirits spoke through them" (318). Like *Sula*'s deranged Shadrack, the insane professor represents a spiritual figure that embodies the nurturing link with the spirits of the dead. Both characters are linked by the element of water; interestingly enough, the first of their two encounters is marked by an unexpected "damp kiss" on Amabelle's lips, which according to popular lore is a sign of good luck, as the onlooking women tell her: "Don't you know that if you are kissed by a crazy man, it brings you luck?" (*FB* 285). The two come together again in the closing scene fraught with spiritual meaning, where the final reunion with the ancestors and the beloved spirits heralds the dawn of eternity, the communal immortality of those who, like Sebastien, died in the Massacre and are commemorated in the novel: "He, like me, was looking for the dawn" (*FB* 310). The intertextual relation between *Sula* and *The Farming of Bones* centers upon the use of death/life metaphors: the description of Sula's and Amabelle's deaths surrounded by water images are remarkably similar. As

Shadrack had promised Sula “a sleep of water always” (Morrison, *Sula* 128), so the professor promises Amabelle a journey into a water eternity: “I’m walking to the dawn” (*FB* 285). She now forms part of the community of water spirits to which she is led by the mad professor: “The professor returned to look down at me lying there... He turned around and walked away, his sandals flapping like two large birds fluttering damp wings, not so much to fly as to preen themselves” (*FB* 310). Water and air coalesce in this final scene with the use of the bird and flight metaphors. The description of the professor walking away on the water confirms his identity as a water spirit or deity. The inevitable Christian overtones that bring back the image of Jesus walking on water point to the final spiritual salvation of the whole Haitian community.

Lastly, the focus on water metaphors makes Danticat’s novel a clear example of what Ann-Janine Morey terms “watertime,” a “crossing [of] the margin of normality,” that is, “a confluence of time and space in which all normal boundaries are suspended” (248). Water represents ambiguity, fluidity, and instability, which are the defining traits of postmodernism and its views on representation. The watery fusion of natural and supernatural, corporeal and spiritual, reality and dream, human and divine, life and death, past and present fulfills Danticat’s aim to “dissolve, escape, and rethink the imprisoning boundaries governing conventional wisdom” (Morey 248), and, we could add, “conventional” history.

The motif of flying has always been present in the literature of African-American writers. Bird and flight metaphors abound in their novels, and Danticat makes use of them, too. One connotation of flight is freedom from the fetters of oppression, as shown in a persecuted Haitian’s jump into the freedom of air.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, recurring references to the smallest of birds, the hummingbird, add to the layered metaphoricity of Danticat’s work and to its spiritual load. One of Oshun’s birds (Brooks De Vita 41) and a symbol of rebirth and eternity, the hummingbird plays a crucial role in the novel. In Aztec mythology, the hummingbird was a sacred animal representing the sun and the idea of rebirth into eternity. It was a hummingbird that guided the Aztec people in their migration and the foundation of their new home Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City. The hummingbird was the Aztec god of war and fire, and dead warriors were supposed to take its shape to ascend to the sky near the sun. All these meanings can be traced in Danticat’s novel. The bird embodies the treasure of eternal life in the scene when Señora Valencia paints “four small hummingbirds” on her son’s coffin (*FB* 91). On the other hand, the return to the past, the traveling back into the interstices of history parallels the hummingbird’s ability to fly backwards, the feature which differentiates it from the rest of birds. Through memory and dreams Amabelle revisits the past and its ghosts, whereas Danticat endows them with eternity through literary discourse.

<sup>3</sup> This flight is reminiscent of Milkman’s flight at the end of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.

Dreams and reality interweave in *The Farming of Bones* with a fluidity that threatens the stability of dividing boundaries. Dreams about her drowned parents fill Amabelle's nightly sleep, as do dreams about the shadows of unknown ancestors who suffered the ravages of slavery, like the sugar woman: "I dream of the sugar woman. Again... Around her face, she wears a shiny silver muzzle, and on her neck there is a collar with a clasped lock dangling from it... the chains on her ankles cymbal a rattled melody..." (FB 132). The protagonist's obsession with faces, which symbolizes her constant yearning and search for her parents, Sebastien, and, by extension, the victims of the Massacre, triggers a conversation with the sugar woman that starts with a question about her face: "'Is your face underneath this?' I ask. The voice that comes out of my mouth surprises me; it is the voice of the orphaned child at the stream, the child who from then on would talk only to strange faces... 'Why are you here?' I ask her. 'Told you before,' she says. 'I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity.'" (FB 132-33). Likewise, the ghost of Amabelle's mother appears to her in dreams, uttering the same final words: "In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her... 'You, my eternity'" (FB 207-08). These women's reassuring words signal the hope for spiritual immortality in the face of physical death and destruction. The passing on of the dead's forgotten stories, giving them a voice in the novel's discourse, is the only hope for eternity and remembrance they may have, as the sugar woman knows. Silence, on the contrary, would mean another kind of death, a second death, as Sebastien claims: "We must talk to remind each other that we are not yet in the slumbering dark, which is an endless death, like a darkened cave... Silence to him is like sleep, a close second to death" (FB 13).

Language, like nature, acquires a dual meaning in this novel. While it can be a healing tool against oppression and oblivion, it can also function as a destructive agent that strongly determines the immigrants' lives. In the novel which blurs the boundaries between life and death, dream and reality, the living and the dead, the duality of language reinforces the pervasive effect of indeterminacy. Language stands, once again, as an empowering token not only for the oppressed but also for the oppressors, as it is the case on the island of Hispaniola, divided between the Spanish of the Dominican Republic and the Creole of Haiti. The foreign accent of Haitian immigrants when they are made to pronounce the Spanish name of the familiar herb *perejil* gives them away and is thus used by Dominicans to identify and persecute them. Furthermore, language is manipulated by imbuing the prisoners' brains with the oppressors' ideas and words. Thus, physical torture gives way to psychological ordeal and personal humiliation. The cruelty of this process is explicitly portrayed through the case of Father Romain, who had helped Haitians and who now reels off the dictator's sentences in his deranged mind:



‘On this island, walk too far in either direction and people speak a different language... Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa, you understand? They once came here only to cut sugarcane, but now there are more of them than there will ever be cane to cut, you understand? Our problem is one of dominion... How can a country be ours if we are in smaller numbers than the outsiders? Those of us who love our country are taking measures to keep it our own... We, as Dominicans, must have our separate traditions and our own ways of living. If not, in less than three generations, we will all be Haitians... our children and grandchildren will have their blood tainted unless we defend ourselves now, you understand?’ (*FB* 260-61)

Trujillo’s discourse appears steeped in prejudice, discrimination and racism, all disguised under the luring idea of love of his nation. His monolithic binary distinction between “us” – the insiders, the Dominicans, the “whiter,” and “them” – the outsiders, the Haitians, the dark Africa’s descendants, lies at the basis of both colonialism and slavery. It is in such frame of mind that violence and dominion are legitimized by oppressors like Trujillo; indeed, as Amabelle points out, it is a cleansing – an ethnic one – that the Generalissimo tries to carry out in his country, a cleansing that she compares to what they Haitians do with parsley: “We use parsley for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larger order was trying to do the same for his country” (*FB* 203).

Within language, names represent life and permanence in memory as well as “a crucial act of claiming self and community” (Brooks De Vita 15). It is not by chance that the very first sentence of the novel refers to naming: “His name is Sebastien Onius” (*FB* 1). Of all things that could be said about the deceased Sebastien, it is precisely his name that is the most important, since through it he lives in the memory of the living, that is, in the “sasa” or present world inhabited by both the living and the dead whose names are still remembered, as believed by many African peoples (Mbiti 25). This is how bell hooks explains the importance of naming:

Naming... has been of crucial concern for many individuals within oppressed groups who struggle for self-recovery, for self-determination.... Within many folk traditions globally... naming is a source of empowerment, an important gesture in the process of creation. A primacy is given to naming as a gesture that deeply shapes and influences the social construction of a self. As in southern African-American folk traditions, a name is perceived as a force that has the power to determine whether or not an individual will be fully self-realized, whether she or he will be able to fulfill their destiny, find their place in the world.... [Names] are a way to preserve and honor aspects of [the] past. (166)

Through the evocation of a name, through the oral tradition that ensures the transmission across generations of the silenced side of history and through what Homi Bhabha terms “the uncanny voice of memory” (450), the boundary of physical death is crossed into spiritual life and permanence. A face and a name constitute the foundations of an identity and of the process of personal formation to the point that “Men with names never truly die. It is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (*FB* 282). By conjuring up Sebastien’s name and the tragic experience of the massacred Haitians through her character Amabelle, Edwidge Danticat honors the memory of the dead and builds a literary grave for those who even in death suffer the evils of invisibility: “There were no graves, no markers. If we tried to dance on graves, we would be dancing on air” (*FB* 270). There must be some kind of memory in nature, some sign of the thousands of bodies that vanished into the transparency of water for future generations to know the true history of their people. Like silence, the lack of memory is another kind of death; on the contrary, “(re)membrance is activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence, and movement” (Holloway 68). Danticat’s novel epitomizes the fluidity of water by emphasizing the illusory nature of established borders between life and death, past and present, dream and reality. Through memory, metaphor, and the power of spirituality literary discourse calls into question the stasis of a received history to move backward into the past, like a hummingbird, calling for revision and renewal.

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