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Argument/Conversation Essay  
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The Purpose of Amabelle’s Dreams:  
Collective Trauma and the Power of Recorded History  

At first sight, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* appears to be a story about a young woman, Amabelle, who relates her experiences in Haiti under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. I am interested in the complexity of Amabelle’s dreams and how that relates to the lack of belonging and lack of identity on the part of the Haitians. Amabelle speaks of facelessness, namelessness, and many who are not remembered; she speaks of shadows, dreams, and darkness. I want to examine how the purpose and effects of Amabelle’s dreams change over time. Through Amabelle’s character, who is haunted by these dreams, Danticat explores the idea of writing and what the power of writing holds over a person, and in this case, an entire nation. She sets forth what happens when history is not recorded, and how this devastates and traumatizes the Haitian people, destroying their very identity. I argue that Danticat created Amabelle’s character to show the reader what happens when there is no ability to write or record events, and if not to call them to action, at least to acknowledge the actual occurrence of the Haitian Massacre. I would further argue that although Amabelle holds in her heart the burden of a writer, she herself does not write. 

In the beginning, Amabelle’s dreams are of Sebastien Onius, and they are pleasant to her, for seeing his face drives away the recurring nightmare of her parents drowning (Danticat “Farming” 1, 51). The first signal to me that the theme of Amabelle’s dreams is a complex one is
in her declaration that, “At times, Sebastien Onius guarded me from the shadows. At other times he was one of them.” (Danticat “Farming” 4) This statement seems to hint that her dreams have become a haunting rather than a healing or way to provide meaning for her. When Amabelle’s mother appears in her dream, she is there to reassure Amabelle of her love for her, and that she was not far from her, even though Amabelle felt hollow and incomplete “for the absence of your face” (Danticat “Farming” 208). Amabelle’s mother seems to be another one of her shadows, another influential and important person in her life, someone that shaped the person Amabelle is, but a person whose face she can no longer see, and this haunts her.

During the slaughter of Amabelle’s people and her close friends, her only way of escaping reality and the horrific events going on around her was to dream. “You may be surprised what we use our dreams to do, how we drape them over our sight and carry them like amulets to protect us from evil spells” (Danticat “Farming” 265). To escape the world she went in to herself, her own memories, memories of her parents drowning in the river, memories of Sebastien, whom she loves. But even this escape is not a relief to Amabelle, rather, “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. The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on… I just need to lay it down sometimes. Even in the rare silence of the night, with no faces around.”(Danticat “Farming” 266) This seems to indicate that her dreams do burden her at times, that the responsibility is sometimes too great for her to bear alone, and she needs “to lay it down sometimes” until she gains the strength to pick it up again. I think this could begin to explain what seems to be a contradiction about the purpose of her dreams. To seek to ignore this burden would be like a form of denial, where truth is suppressed or even destroyed. Even worse, to be
stripped of the ability to record an important part of a nation’s history is, perhaps, more
traumatizing than the massacre itself. People most often learn to heal after witnessing death, even
violent, brutal death. However, when such events are denied a place in history, the burden of
healing is doubly increased, and a great gaping hole is produced. This is made evident through
the dreams that haunt Amabelle. Through Amabelle, Danticat is arguing for the power writing
holds. The interesting thing is, Amabelle herself does not write. She is the narrator, and the way
the book is written in first person gives us the illusion that she is an artist herself, a writer, but
this is not the case. Amabelle does not write. In fact, she spends nearly the entire book wishing
someone, anyone, would record the experiences she and the Haitian people have had and are
having. This is why she is so traumatized herself.

This idea of collective, mass trauma seems important, and in his article “Writing
Disaster” Martin Munro mentions Maurice Blanchot’s idea of a “fragmented narrative” that
leaves Amabelle’s questions unanswered. “Fragmented narratives such as Danticat's are born out
of human catastrophes for, as Blanchot says, ‘the need for fragmentation is related to disaster’”
(Munro 93). With trauma comes fragmented recollection or memory of the event itself, or series
of events. What exactly is trauma, however? “‘In her influential work on trauma, Cathy Caruth
defines it as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events’ in which ‘the
response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of
hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.’ Similarly, Jeannie Suk argues that ‘trauma seems
at first to offer a paradoxical model in which a powerfully unusual event is at once inaccessible
to the person who ‘experienced’ it, and yet all too available in nightmare, hallucination, and
unwanted repetition... The event evades direct reference and knowledge, and yet provides
constant torment’” (Munro 83-84). A traumatized person may remember in exact detail certain
aspects of what occurred, or may have repressed the memories. This repression will often emerge later on in life; in Amabelle’s case, it emerges in her dreams. “Amabelle wishes to forget the traumatic past, but also feels a deep need to testify, or to speak the unspeakable.” (Munro 88)

Amabelle realizes the nature of written record, the purpose of it, is to “testify, reveal, and record the suffering she and others experienced” (Munro 89). They are fully alive, unrepressed at this point, haunting her, oppressing her. They cannot be repressed. The mass repression is what exacerbates the traumatic event itself. It is the biting of the tongue, the holding back of the pen which causes the memories to claw their way up the throat. They shout to be dealt with, to not be ignored, much like when the Haitians gathered, begging the justice of the peace to record the names of the dead in the book. While I agree that Amabelle feels deeply this need to testify, and that she understand the power of recorded history, I would also argue further that she does not have the ability to deal with what happened by recording these events, so she holds them inside her instead.

But why does she not have this ability? It could be the rather obvious reason that Amabelle is illiterate. Perhaps the answer is as simple as that, but another could also be explored. I do not think that I can speak for Amabelle, but I can speak for the author, or rather, let Danticat speak for herself. In “Create Dangerously,” Danticat addresses the risk that is taken through the acts of writing and reading. “Mourir et beau, to die is beautiful, declares the Haitian national anthem. But writing could never attain that kind of beauty. Or could it? Writing is nothing like dying in, for, and possibly with, your country” (Danticat “Create” 12). It might be going too far to suggest that Amabelle sees this as well. Although we are not told that Amabelle is an artist of any sort, that does not mean she is not one. Everyone, in some form, is an artist. Only, in Amabelle’ case, the words and images are stuck within in her mind, emerging only in her dreams.
and memories. If we assume that she is literate and an artist, then the only other explanation that I can see for her silence is her fear and uncertainty that even if she was not executed or banished for doing the unthinkable—keeping the story alive—the words could not do the massacre justice, so she stifles them.

However, here I find confusion, because while Amabelle seems to understand writing may be the only way to heal from this horrific massacre and trauma of the Haitians, she also does not view it as worth it to lose her life under the hand of the dictatorship. She would rather lose her life peacefully, beside the waterfall, perhaps. “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” (Danticat “Farming” 310). Amabelle has seen enough death. Death is not beautiful to her, nor is heroic. It is an ugly image that haunts her at nearly every waking, and sleeping, moment. It has haunted her since childhood, when her parents died. It haunts her with Sebastian’s death. No, death is not beautiful to Amabelle. Despite her trauma and despite the repressed story inside her, writing, no matter how “beautiful” it may be, is not something to die for. All she desires, I believe, is peace, something to settle the storm raging inside her. “We, the storytellers of the world, ought to be more grateful than most that banishment, rather than execution, was chosen for Adam and Eve, for had they been executed, there would never have been another story told, no stories to pass on” (Danticat “Create” 6). The story is there, and Amabelle holds it within her. But perhaps she is too weary to pass it on. She will leave it to another to “Create Dangerously.” Too many lives have already been lost. She seems to call on the reader to recognize the power writing holds, but also to plead with someone to bear the burden of the artist. Danticat seems to fulfill Amabelle’s desire by recording the events and calling on the reader to remember.
Exactly what is this power writing has in Danticat’s eyes? What is the point of using Amabelle to hold the events in her memory and dreams? In “Create Dangerously” Danticat stresses the idea of homeland and the roots of the artist who writes. The writer is an itinerant one (6). Like Amabelle, the writer is searching for a home, for rest, for safety. The history behind this story is brought to the forefront mainly through Amabelle’s dreams, where she calls us to see, to hear, and to remember. This great fear of a gaping hole in their history, a gaping hole where their face, their identity, should be is perhaps the reason why Amabelle feels the burden to represent her entire nation. Here it is apparent that history plays an important role in the eyes of the Haitian people, and of Amabelle herself. Instilled in the Haitians is a desire to return to their homeland across the river, across the mountains. “Father Romain…often reminded everyone of common ties: language, food, history, carnival, songs, tales, and prayers. His creed was one of memory, how remembering—though sometimes painful—can make you strong” (Danticat “Farming” 73).

Munro also argues that “the retreat into the self that trauma brings about is finally an attempt to repossess memory. As Amabelle suggests, the traumatized individual feels a deep need, and indeed has the absolute right to possess memory, and then to share it, to testify…” (Munro 91) I agree that there are many similarities between Amabelle herself and the inward life of a writer; however, there is a notable difference that cannot be ignored. Amabelle describes very well the nature and power of the art of writing and the motivations of the artist. Amabelle needs to drive the traumatic events from her mind because it is such a great burden. So does the writer; because, already in the writer’s mind, they have an intense need to find themselves. But the fear that Danticat describes, in losing her very identity, is the same fear Amabelle describes in reference to herself and to her people. This great fear is a fear of the fact that if this slaughter ends up wiping out the entire Haitian population, and these events are not recorded, would their
existence even matter? If forgotten, it would be like they never existed at all. They will be nameless, faceless, without identity. I agree with Munro who says, “In her [Amabelle’s] dream-testimony she repeats almost litanically [ritually prayer-like] the refrain "His name is Sebastien Onius," for, as she says, "Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air" (Danticat “Farming” 282). It is why at the very beginning, and end of the novel Amabelle continually repeats this phrase, and it is also why Kongo continually repeats the words, “My son” (Danticat “Farming” 107-109) following the sudden death of his son. The presence of these repetitions is more than mere remembrance of those dead; it the strangling, suffocating fear of forgetting them.

The story is not about Amabelle alone. She is the single voice crying out to us on behalf of her people for us to acknowledge their existence and the fact that the slaughter even happened. However, this does bring up a slight problem, as I cannot automatically assume that the entire Haitian people felt the way she did in wanting their history recorded. Based on the passage about the Justice of the Peace, and in the interview between Danticat and Junot Diaz, I believe there is good evidence to support the fact that Amabelle is the voice of her nation. Through Amabelle, Danticat addresses the desires and fears of an entire nation. At first, it seemed to me that Amabelle’s dreams were important in examining her alone, but through further analysis I realized that the nature of her dreams is related both to the nature of writing, and also to the collective trauma or “fragmented narrative” of the Haitian people. Rather than Amabelle only trying to deal with the personal trauma (especially the loss of Sebastien) of the slaughter, I believe she is also informing the reader of these events.

What effect are the record of these dreams supposed to have on the reader’s perception of the history behind the conflict? What would be lost if the dreams were not in the book?
Amabelle’s dreams and story is the record the Haitian people have to remember them. Danticat uses Amabelle’s dreams to call out to the reader to see the history and be witnesses of the events. The justice of the peace would not record the names of their dead in “the book,” so this is the record, this is the remembrance. But what is the importance of this book? How would a written record of events bring any sort of comfort or healing to Amabelle or her people? Like dreams, book can be fantasies; like memories, books can be a record of history. Put together, the two can become a ghostly presence, a combination of reality and illusion, memory and wishful thinking. I thought Amabelle is trying to reconcile the two; but, maybe the opposite is happening, maybe she is instead trying to separate the two so she can see the pieces clearly, so that not only she, but also her people, can begin to heal.

The danger of having no written record is that there will be a great gaping hole in Haitian history: “The group charged the station looking for someone to write their names in a book, and take their story to President Vincent. They wanted a civilian face to concede that what they had witnessed and lived through did truly happen” (Danticat “Farming” 236). When their desires were not met, they burn part of the station, but specifically a photo of President Vincent (President of Haiti). It is important to note the detail given that “in the photograph, he wore…the shiny medal of the Grand Cross…given to him by the Generalissimo (Rafael Trujillo) as a symbol of eternal friendship between our two peoples” (Danticat “Farming,” 236). This event is a symbol of the tearing apart of this friendship, but also important in another way. The people wanted a “civilian face” to acknowledge their persecution, a civilian, because they would not skew the events that occurred. A civilian would not hide or manipulate the details of the slaughter while someone in a leadership position most likely would do just that. By not receiving
the satisfaction of having their own faces and names recognized, the crowd retaliates by destroying the identity of their leader by burning his face and the Grand Cross.

The power of writing, but more importantly, the power of writing history, is one of the main themes in Danticat’s *Farming of Bones*. Danticat brought this out in a way that was not immediately clear to me, and may not be for most readers. However, she does it in a brilliant way through Amabelle’s character, bringing both Amabelle and the reader not to a place of closure, but to a place of rest and healing. I believe Amabelle’s dreams are something she does not want to release, because they bring her peace. They bring her to a place where Sebastien is alive, to a place where her mother visits her in the night. They remind her of a time when nothing was lost. Yes, her dreams haunt her, but they also bring her peace, not quite closure, but an element of peace. Amabelle and we the readers cannot fully come to terms with the massacre that took place, and we are not meant to. We are, though, meant to come to a place where we realize that one day we may come to a place where rather than frequently unburdening ourselves through the retelling of events, we can “lay it down” for good, and become strong by remembering.
Works Cited


