Postcolonial Trauma: Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and the Haitian Massacre of 1937

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There is a parrot imitating spring.

El General has found his word: perejil.

Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining
out of the swamp. The cane appears
in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.

And we lie down. For every drop of blood
there is a parrot imitating spring.

Out of the swamp the cane appears

— Rita Dove, Parsley
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Introduction

Rafael Trujillo, the president of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961, was obsessed with race and status. During his regime, he strongly institutionalized antihaitianismo, the policy of racial segregation. He was inspired by Hitler’s racial theories and even owned a copy of Mein Kampf. Trujillo began to contemplate the idea of “whitening” his nation after he had travelled across the country in the summer of 1937. The dictator had been appalled by the large number of Haitian immigrants he had encountered on his side of the border and wanted to prohibit them from “contaminating” his nation any further. The speech he gave on 2 October 1937 in the border town Dajabón made his intentions clear. He promised the population that the problems with the Haitians would soon be over:

> For some months, I have traveled and traversed the border in every sense of the word. I have seen, investigated, and inquired about the needs of the population. To the Dominicans who were complaining of the depredations by Haitians living among them, thefts of cattle, provisions, fruits, etc., and were thus prevented from enjoying in peace the products of their labor, I have responded, ‘I will fix this.’ And we have already begun to remedy the situation. Three hundred Haitians are now dead in Bánica. This remedy will continue. (qtd. in Turits 25)

During the five days that followed, Trujillo’s army systematically slaughtered nearly 12,000 Haitian immigrants with machetes. Those who attempted to escape were killed at the border and thrown in the Massacre River, the river that separates the two countries. The atrocity is often referred to as the “Parsley Massacre”. The Dominican soldiers subjected all the darker-skinned people they came across to the “parsley test” to distinguish the Haitians from the Dominicans. Because of their Krèyol accent, Haitians were unable to pronounce the Spanish word perejil (parsley) correctly. The soldiers forced their captives to utter the word and murdered them when their accent betrayed them. In the aftermath of the massacre, Rafael Trujillo refused to admit that he had given the order for the operation. His strong diplomatic position as an ally of the United States against the upcoming fascism in Europe enabled him to get away with his crimes. He only had to pay the government of Haiti a cash indemnity in order to escape punishment. The massacre of 1937 is now merely a footnote in the official history of the island of Hispaniola. The Haitians, however, are still deeply traumatized by the event.
The twentieth century has often been referred to as the era of trauma. The entire society has been unsettled by numerous wars, genocides and other tragedies and is therefore becoming more and more fascinated with the subject of trauma. The field of trauma studies emerged in the 1990s as an interdisciplinary area informed by psychoanalysis. Cathy Caruth, one of the founding figures, insists that trauma studies has a commitment to ethics and that it can contribute to cross-cultural understanding. Critics such as Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, however, argue that the model of trauma as it has been developed by Caruth and others ignores the specific cultural and political contexts of non-Western societies. The concept of trauma is formulated in a Euro-American context and is tied up with concerns of the Western culture. Therefore, it is doubtful whether it can be extended to non-Western societies, which often have another notion of self and attribute a different meaning to suffering, illness and tragedy. Trauma studies should engage with postcolonial studies in order to fulfil its promise of cross-cultural solidarity. If the field of trauma studies changes it parameters, it could be suitable for analyzing the traumatic legacy of postcolonial narratives. This present study will consider all the issues that are brought up above. It will focus on the way that trauma is expressed and experienced in The Farming of Bones, a postcolonial novel by the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat.

The Farming of Bones is centred around the massacre of 1937 and was written in response to the lack of official acknowledgment of this historical trauma. Edwidge Danticat has taken it upon herself to give a name and a face to the Haitians who have been silenced by the governments on both sides of the island. She fully realized the importance of her work during a visit to Haiti. When she arrived at the banks of the Massacre River, she was astonished by the absence of memorials for the victims of the event: “I felt like I was standing on top of a huge mass grave, and just couldn’t see the bodies. That’s the first time I remember thinking, ‘Nature has no memory’(...) and that’s why we have to have memory” (qtd. in Vega-González 8). Her novel especially portrays the struggle of the Haitian victims to survive during and after the slaughter. The protagonist is Amabelle Désir, a young Haitian woman who is working as a servant in a wealthy Dominican household. She is in love with Sebastien, one of the cane cutters who perform labour in the sugarcane fields. When he gets captured by the Dominican army, Amabelle decides to flee her adopted city in the hope of being reunited with Sebastien in a safer place. She arrives in the border town Dajabón at the moment that Trujillo is giving his infamous speech. His words incite the gathered crowd and they start
attacking Amabelle and the other Haitian refugees. After the assault, Amabelle is severely mutilated. She returns to Haiti with Sebastien’s best friend Yves and decides to wait for her lover in their hometown Cap Haïtien. Some of the other survivors that have come back claim that they had witnessed Sebastien’s death. Nevertheless, Amabelle refuses to accept that he is gone and keeps waiting in vain for him to return. Her bodily injuries and her traumatic memories make it impossible for her to put the past behind her and to move on.

*The Farming of Bones* has received considerable critical acclaim and has been the focus of study of various literary scholars. The article that will be of most value to this dissertation is “A Marred Testament” by Amy Novak. This is the article that most fully addresses the issue of postcolonial trauma in *The Farming of Bones*. Novak considers the novel in its political context, examines the materiality of Amabelle’s trauma and explores the structure of the narrative text. Just like Novak, April Shemak attributes special attention to the materiality of trauma in “Re-Membering Hispaniola”. In addition, she focuses on the troubled relation between the Dominican and the Haitian characters and investigates whether they can overcome the boundaries that divide them. In “Remaking Identity, Unmaking Nation”, Lynn Chun Ink suggests that shared suffering can create a collective identity that surmounts the national boundaries. Marta Caminero-Santangelo locates *The Farming of Bones* “At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio”. She explains the differences between testimonial novels and trauma literature, and elaborates on the role of testimony in Danticat’s novel. Martin Munro’s article “Writing Disaster” will also be of considerable value. He places *The Farming of Bones* within a Caribbean tradition and makes it apparent that Haiti has been shaped by its traumatic past.

This master dissertation will analyze Danticat’s novel in light of trauma and postcolonial studies and will point out discrepancies and similarities. One of its major contributions will be its attention to the historical, cultural and political context of *The Farming of Bones*. It will investigate whether the concepts of trauma theory can be extended to the context of the novel or whether Haitian culture has a distinct notion of trauma. Secondly, it will examine whether trauma studies should engage with postcolonial studies to develop a framework for understanding the traumas of the Haitian characters in the novel. Danticat wants to denounce the injustice that still prevails in Hispaniola by exploring its roots and by showing that the past and the present are imbricated in one another. Considering that Haiti’s tormented past haunts the narrative, it will be imperative to examine the traces of past
traumas in the novel. Furthermore, the references to Haitian Vodou and to cultural traditions will be explained. These have not been thoroughly analyzed yet in other critical works. In order to understand the specificity of Amabelle’s traumas, it will be helpful to gain insight into Haitian society and to compare these findings with the personal history of the protagonist. However, the analysis of the novel will demand a certain level of homogeneity and generalization as well.

This dissertation is divided into seven main chapters. The opening chapter introduces the theoretical framework that will be applied to Danticat’s novel. The first section is dedicated to the groundbreaking work of major trauma scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. The second part of the chapter will elaborate on the critique offered by Jill Bennett, Rosanne Kennedy and others. The next part focuses on the aesthetics of trauma. Finally, it will be examined whether the massacre of 1937 can be theorized as a collective trauma.

The massacre of 1937 can be regarded as the consequence of the tensions that had been building up for centuries in Hispaniola. Therefore, the second chapter gives an overview of the history of the island. Furthermore, the allusions to Haiti’s traumatic legacy in *The Farming of Bones* will be analyzed. The chapter also briefly explores how the Haitians deal with being exposed to ongoing trauma.

The third chapter gives an outline of the various traumas that the protagonist of *The Farming of Bones* has suffered. It furthermore examines how the narrative itself is affected by the unassimilable nature of trauma. The novel is composed out of a chronological, retrospective narrative that is being disrupted by atemporal fragments in bold. These sequences in bold depict Amabelle’s dreams, hallucinations and traumatic memories. The final section of this chapter draws attention to some of the recurring images and expressions in the novel. These echoes haunt both Amabelle’s psyche and the narrative text.

In the fourth chapter, the role of the dead in *The Farming of Bones* will be analyzed. Amabelle’s dead lover and parents continue to live in her nightmares. She is not always haunted by their apparition; at times, she deliberately summons them. There will be examined whether the belief system of Haitian Vodou affects the way in which the protagonist deals with death.
The next chapter explores the cultural potential of testimony in *The Farming of Bones*. The concept of *testimonio*, a genre that originated in the Caribbean and in Central-America will be introduced. Secondly, the difference between testimonial novels and trauma literature will be explained. Finally, it will be established whether Danticat’s novel has a *testimonio* function.

The sixth chapter focuses on the materiality of trauma. The oral testimonies of the survivors of the massacre were mostly dismissed by the government in the wake of the massacre. Their mutilated bodies, however, offered a continual testimony to the atrocities and therefore challenged the authorities. This chapter furthermore elaborates on the physicality of trauma, and applies Charlotte Delbo’s concepts of deep memory and common memory to Amabelle’s narrative.

The final chapter investigates whether the traumatic histories of the characters are implicated in each other. The boundaries between different social groups make it difficult for individuals from different classes and nationalities to reach out to one another. The first section of this chapter analyzes whether there are characters that succeed in crossing established boundaries, or whether the prejudices are too deep-rooted to overcome. The second part applies the Vodou concept *Marasa* consciousness to *The Farming of Bones*. This concept focuses on transformation, and thus moves beyond the binary oppositions that shape Western society.
Chapter 1. The intersection between trauma studies and postcolonial studies

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework that will be used to analyze The Farming of Bones. The first section explains the evolution of the notion of trauma; it especially focuses on the contributions of Sigmund Freud. Furthermore, it elaborates on the emergence of trauma studies and on the work of some of the most notable trauma scholars. The next section explores whether the concepts of trauma theory can be applied to texts in a cross-cultural context. The third section examines the literary techniques that are used in The Farming of Bones. There is discussion within the field whether trauma should be represented by anti-narrative techniques or whether there should be more tolerance towards realism and indigenous literary forms. Finally, the implications of the shift from individual to collective trauma will be analyzed. Trauma theory tends to focus on the individual, while colonial trauma has been theorized as a collective trauma.

1.1. Trauma theory in its mid-1990s formulation

The concept of trauma as it is known today was created at the end of the nineteenth century. The word derived from the Greek word for wound and originally had a physical meaning. Prominent psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud altered its meaning to denote a sudden shock that wounded the mind (Caruth 3). Freud’s model of trauma evolved considerably during his career. In his early psychoanalytic work, he showed an interest in the behaviour of hysterical and neurotic women and he emphasized the impact of sexual instinct on human behaviour. In 1896, he developed the “seduction theory” in which he claimed that hysterical neuroses could only be explained by sexual abuse in childhood (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 165). He asserted that the abuse was initially not experienced as traumatic by the victims, because the children lacked the cognitive framework to understand what had happened. When the abused person had another sexual experience in puberty, she would reinterpret the previous experience and start displaying hysterical behaviour. Freud revisited his theory in the late 1890s. He did not ascribe hysteria to a traumatic experience anymore and focused instead on the active repression of hidden desires. He developed the theory of dreams as the fulfilment of those hidden desires in The Interpretation of Dreams.

In 1920, Freud published Beyond the Pleasure Principle, a work that would announce a turning point. In the wake of the First World War, Freud had discovered that the
symptomatic behaviour of returning soldiers resembled that of the hysterical women. Moreover, the survivors often revisited traumatic events in their nightmares. What astonished him was that the events returned in their literal form and that the survivors had no control over this process (Caruth 5). Freud changed the theory of dreams as wish-fulfilment and asserted that human behaviour could not only be explained by sexual instinct, but also by death instinct. In *Moses and Monotheism*, one of the last works he published during his career, Freud developed a model for understanding trauma based on his study of how the survivors of a train crash act afterwards. He found out that when someone had suffered a grave accident, he or she could get away “apparently unharmed” (qtd. in Caruth 7). The survivor had registered what had happened to him or her, but went into denial and repressed the trauma. However, there would always be a “return of the repressed” (qtd. in Caruth 7). Freud used the term “latency” to describe the period between the real event, its repression, and its return (Caruth 7).

Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart criticize the way Freud applied the concept of repression in his theories and especially how he confused the term with the concept of dissociation. They point out that there is a fundamental difference between the two terms:

Repression reflects a vertically layered model of mind: what is repressed is pushed downward, into the unconscious. The subject no longer has access to it. (...) Dissociation reflects a horizontally layered model of mind: when a subject does not remember a trauma, its “memory” is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness. (169)

Research has proven that the mechanism of dissociation is involuntary, so Freud’s theory does not hold. The mechanism is already set in motion while the traumatic event is still happening, which could result in a so-called out-of-body experience.

The study of trauma as a cultural phenomenon emerged in the 1990s and is heavily indebted to psychoanalysis. Cathy Caruth, one of the founding figures of trauma theory, asserts in “Recapturing the Past” that a traumatic experience exceeds the limits of the victim’s understanding and that it cannot be assimilated into what Pierre Janet calls “narrative memory” (Caruth 153). In “Trauma and Experience”, she elaborates that there is “an inherent latency within the experience itself” (Caruth 8). In other words, the traumatic event is initially not registered. Caruth agrees with Freud that the inability of the victim to apprehend the traumatic event as it occurs causes it to reappear in its literal form in the present. The event “is
not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Caruth 4). Because of this re-enactment, the traumatized victim is no longer capable of distinguishing between past, present and future. Trauma is thus not “locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4).

Caruth’s version of trauma theory echoes what trauma theorist Dori Laub had stated earlier in “Bearing Witness”:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect (...) To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially of re-externalizing the event—has to be set in motion. (69)

The survivor of a traumatic event can only truly witness what has happened to him if he is able to testify. The victim essentially “testifies to an absence”, since the event was not registered at the moment that it was happening (57). Therefore, the listener becomes “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). Laub underscores the importance of an empathic therapist or listener to whom the victim can tell his or her story. In “Truth and Testimony”, Laub analyzes the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. He argues that even though they “needed to tell their stories in order to survive”, they often chose to remain silent as well (63). It was impossible for the Holocaust survivors to testify to the incomprehensibility of their traumatic experience. According to Laub, the inability to testify allowed the traumatic event to intrude their daily life and to contaminate their memories (64). Since the traumatic event was not confined to the past, it continued to haunt them in the present. The act of giving testimony could enable them to repossess their own life story (70), and could help them to face their losses (71).

Dominick LaCapra, another major trauma theorist, argues that Caruth puts too much emphasis on “the compulsive repetition or acting out of a traumatic past” (121). He distinguishes between acting out and working through. Acting out is pathological and repetitive and forces the victim to revisit the moment of the crisis. The routine of going back can be a mental process, which means that the survivor will re-experience his or her trauma in
nightmares or in daytime delusions and flashbacks. The victim can either suffer from amnesia, the absence of memory, or hypermnesia, an excess of memories. When the mind fails to recall the trauma, the victim often feels the urge to physically return to the moment of crisis. Working through on the other hand is concerned with overcoming the post-traumatic effects. The traumatized victim needs to gain distance from his or her experience if he or she wants to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. LaCapra moreover contests the tendency of some critics to regard acting out and working through as diametrically opposed categories (130). According to this oversimplified view, acting out is preventing closure, while working through means the victim can attain closure. LaCapra points out that acting out is intimately related to working through, and that working through does not mean that the victim will be able to heal or change completely (119).

1.2. Trauma in a cross-cultural context

Caruth believes that “critics can gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation” if they bring the “insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artifacts that bear witness to traumatic histories” (Craps and Buelens 1). However, Craps and Buelens point out that traditional trauma theory is primarily focused on Euro-American histories and that it could be inadequate to examine other traumatic experiences (2). Literary scholars such as Caruth tend to marginalize the traumatic experiences of subordinate groups in society and neglect the histories of non-Western cultures. In addition, they assume that the concepts and definitions of trauma that they have developed are universal and can be easily extended to examine other traumatic histories. Instead of closing the gap between disparate cultures, they actually contribute to the maintenance of Eurocentrism (2). Therefore, Craps and Buelens doubt that trauma theory in its classical, mid-1990s formulation can fulfil its promise of promoting cross-cultural solidarity as articulated by Caruth in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, where she claims that “trauma itself may provide the link between cultures” (11). Craps and Buelens conclude that “western traumatic histories must be seen to be tied up with histories of colonial trauma for trauma studies to be able to redeem its promise of ethical effectiveness” (2).

Similarly, Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy point out that trauma theory needs to change its parameters if it wants to be able to examine stories in a cross-cultural context. According to them, trauma studies could be “indicative of a new kind of cultural politics” (4).
At the same time, however, they question whether the field of trauma studies is suitable for understanding the traumatic histories of non-Western communities (Bennett and Kennedy 4). Only if trauma studies could move “beyond its focus on Euro-American events and experiences,” could it become “a study of memory that takes as its starting point the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture” (5). Furthermore, postcolonial studies must “engage with trauma studies in order to develop more complex frameworks for the study of memory” (5). It is also important to keep in mind that the political and cultural context has an impact on the way that trauma is experienced and processed. Whether or not certain experiences are considered to be traumatic not only depends on the history and the cultural traditions of a nation. Most of the time, it is also the position of the victims with respect to the dominant culture that plays a determining role (13).

The feminist theorist Laura Brown remarks that the traditional definition of a traumatic event as an “event that is outside the range of human experience” is too limited (100): “The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class Christian men” (101). The dominant groups in culture assess which traumatic events can be acknowledged by official history. They select the histories in which they come across as victims, and ignore the traumatic experiences in which they have participated as perpetrators (102). Brown uses “insidious trauma”, a term coined by Maria Root to refer to “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the body and spirit” (107). In its classical formulation, the definition of trauma is limited to catastrophic, unusual events that shock the victim. An extended version of what Michael Rothberg calls “the event-based model of trauma” (226) could be helpful for understanding non-Western traumas, such as colonial violence. Haiti, for example, is still haunted by its traumatizing colonial past. It is likely that this influences the way that the population deals with each new traumatic event. Moreover, the Haitian immigrants are constantly exposed to trauma in the Dominican Republic, since they are treated as inferior beings and are regularly the victims of racist violence.

Frantz Fanon already addressed the traumatic impact of racial violence in the study he published in 1952, namely *Black Skin, White Masks*. In the chapter “The Fact of Blackness”, he describes how an encounter with a terrified white boy has altered his perception of the
inner-workings of Western culture. The boy started insulting him by yelling “dirty nigger” and “Look, a Negro!” (109). He realizes he is not the slave of “the idea that others have of [him] but of [his] own appearance” (116). His otherness puts him in a fixed category, whether he wants this or not. Moreover, he now grasps how the entire history of racial violence and prejudice is still tied up with a singular racist encounter in the present: “I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism [sic], racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (Fanon 112). Decades after Fanon published this book, the traumatizing effects of ongoing racism against people of colour, or the oppression of homosexuals and women still do not receive the attention they deserve in trauma studies.

1.3. The aesthetics of trauma

The model of trauma theory that is developed in the mid-1990s takes for granted that conventional, teleological narratives are inadequate to represent trauma. However, there is some discussion as to whether this is actually the case. On the one hand, there are critics who defend the claim that trauma can solely be represented through the use of anti-narrative postmodern techniques, considering that trauma itself is characterized by a failure of representation. Hayden White, for example, assumes that “the kinds of anti-narrative non-stories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of ‘unnatural’ events – including the Holocaust – that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the ‘history’ that has come before it” (qtd. in Bennett and Kennedy 10). Bennett and Kennedy, on the other hand, promote greater tolerance towards realism and indigenous literary forms. They remark that “the prescription of preferred textual forms ignores the ways in which post-traumatic memory is always a cultural construction, which both draws and innovates on the available cultural frameworks and traditions” (12). Rosanne Kennedy and Tikka Jan Wilson similarly wonder why traumas of non-Western societies should be represented by literary techniques developed within a European cultural tradition (125).

The postcolonial writer Edwidge Danticat uses postmodern techniques such as narrative self-consciousness, repetition, disruptive chronology, fragmentation and non-closure in *The Farming of Bones* to convey a failure to represent trauma and to draw attention to the
impossibility of knowing the truth. Martin Munro points out that “Danticat does not (re)valorize fragmentation in any straightforward, celebratory way, as has been the tendency in much recent postcolonial theory and fiction” (92). The narrative does not praise the fragmented nature of Caribbean culture and identity:

[The] recuperation of cultural and identitary fragmentation fits neatly into the dominant contemporary model of postcolonial, postmodern Caribbean identity as a “free floating, carnivalesque version of plurality, which… constitutes a kind of abundance” (Britton 2001: 45). In stark contrast, Danticat’s fragments remain troubling and disjointed, signs of lack rather than abundance. (92)

Even though Danticat’s mother tongue is Kreyòl, she writes her novels in English and addresses them to an American readership. Her position as a Haitian-American writer gives her the opportunity to challenge boundaries, and to transform binary oppositions such as aesthetic/vernacular and Euro-American/Indigenous. She uses the language and the literary forms of the dominant groups in society as subversion. The Farming of Bones questions historiography and focuses on the gaps and silences of official discourse. This coincides with Michael Dash’s assertion that Caribbean writers often employ anti-narrative techniques as a tool for reflection and critique:

Caribbean writing exploits precisely this [postmodern] terrain of the unspeakable. In the radical questioning of the need to totalise, systematise and control, the Caribbean writer is a natural deconstructionist who praises latency, formlessness and plurality. In order to survive, the Caribbean sensibility must spontaneously decipher and interpret the sign systems of those who wish to dominate and control. (297)

1.4. The shift from individual to collective trauma

Generally speaking, trauma theory invests in individual psychology, while lately, some postcolonial critics have suggested that colonial trauma can be regarded as a collective trauma. The postcolonial critic Sam Durrant, for example, claims that histories of slavery and colonialism:

do violence both to the individual and the collective imagination. Such events have been described as collective or cultural trauma not simply by aggregating the traumatic experiences of individual victims, but because they disrupt the ‘consciousness’ of the entire community, destroying the possibility of a common frame of reference and calling into question our sense of being-in-common. (4)

The transition from individual to collective trauma causes polemic within the field. On the one hand, there are critics who argue that the concepts developed by trauma theory can be
easily extended to take into account collective trauma. Kari Erikson, Linda Hutcheon and Dominick LaCapra treat societies almost the same way as they treat individuals. Erikson, for example, claims that the concept of trauma can “serve as a broad social concept as well as a more narrowly clinical one” (qtd. in Saunders and Aghaie 17). Hutcheon asserts that psychoanalytical concepts can be allegorically extended to collective contexts (21). Similarly, LaCapra not only uses the notions of “acting out” and “working through” to examine how the individual responds to traumatic events; he applies these psychoanalytical categories as well to larger social entities (Saunders and Aghaie 17). Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie on the other hand question whether communities experience trauma the same way as individuals do (17). They point out that Frantz Fanon already analyzed the matter in his innovative work The Wretched of the Earth. In this text, Fanon proposed a shift from “the individual to a social situation” (Saunders and Aghaie 18). Secondly, he suggested to move away “from relations within the family unit to the relation between families and the national unit” (Saunders and Aghaie 18). Finally, he wanted to address “the pervasive and diffuse inhumanity of racism and colonialism” instead of solely taking into account a singular “traumatogenic event” (Saunders and Aghaie 18).

Jeffrey Alexander and the contributors to the volume Cultural Trauma present a different take on how the individual is related to the collective. They attempt to prove that trauma is a social construction (8). Ron Eyerman insists that trauma has a different impact on a culture than it has on individuals: “As cultural process, trauma is linked to the formation of collective identities and the construction of collective memory” (60). Collective trauma is not the product of a horrific event itself, but of the nation that decides that its suffering affects the identity of the collective (10). Once the collective has settled down again, it will objectify the trauma in museums and monuments so that the experience will not be forgotten (23). Alexander claims that members of collectivities can empathize with each other’s suffering, but at the same time, they often neglect the suffering of those who do not belong to their social group (1). He furthermore asserts that trauma theory can be effortlessly “extended to the experiences of trauma outside of Western societies” (Alexander 24). Saunders and Aghaie contest this assumption. Alexander and his colleagues neglect the fact that non-Western societies might experience and express trauma in a different manner (18).

Saunders and Aghaie furthermore observe that while the leaders of nations often commemorate traumatic events to promote their own goals, the opposite policy is
implemented as well: “While traumatic events are often remembered and mourned, they are just as often forgotten, buried in a collectively willed, or politically coerced, amnesia” (23). It is indisputable that this is the case when it comes to the Haitian Massacre of 1937. This event is the central historical trauma that is addressed in Edwidge Danticat’s novel *The Farming of Bones*. The slaughter provoked an international wave of protest. Nevertheless, the Dominican president Rafael Trujillo could get away with the atrocities that were committed in his name. The testimonies of the surviving Haitians were brushed aside and there were no memorials built to commemorate the victims. As the massacre was being ignored by the official history, the event slowly but surely stopped occupying the rest of the world as well. The lack of official commemoration makes Amy Novak wonder how a nation can work through a trauma it refuses to acknowledge (100).

The massacre of 1937 has damaged the collective identity of the Haitians. They were appalled by the passive reaction of the Haitian president in the wake of the slaughter and no longer believed that they were a strong nation. Even though the voices of the victims were silenced, the Haitians never ceased commemorating the event. In Haitian culture, trauma is expressed and communicated in a different way than in the Western world. While people in Western societies tend to write history down and to read books if they want to learn more about past experiences, the Haitians pass the knowledge of their ancestors and past traumas on through oral performance and dance. According to Saunders and Aghaie, “the isolated personal grief, in which trauma victims tend to feel cut off from the rest of the world, once it is expressed in songs and stories, is transformed into a communal experience, which provides a sense of shared meaning and acceptance” (21). Haitian Vodou also helps the entire nation to find meaning in their suffering since the rituals are all “collective healing ceremonies” (Michel 34). Maya Deren observes that in a traumatized country such as Haiti, religion “must do more than give moral sustenance; (...) must do more than provide a reason for living, it must provide the means for living. It must serve the organism as well as the psyche. It must serve as practical methodology, not as individual hope” (qtd. in Michel 33). In conclusion, the massacre can be regarded as a collective trauma for the Haitians, even though official history does not acknowledge it as one.
Chapter 2. The chain of traumas in the history of Haiti

Before analysing the literary text, it is important to understand the conditions that enabled the Haitian Massacre of 1937. As April Shemak observes, the massacre is only “the culmination of the many previous attempts to contain race and nation” (98). The first section of this chapter gives a brief overview of the history of the island of Hispaniola. This will be helpful to gain insight into the roots of the massacre in past trauma. The second section analyzes the traces of past trauma in *The Farming of Bones* and the tensions that led to the slaughter.

2.1. Hispaniola’s troubled history

In the early sixteenth century, African slaves were imported to the island of Hispaniola to work on sugarcane plantations. In 1697, the island was divided into Spanish and French colonies by the Treaty of Ryswick. Spain received the eastern part, which was called Santo Domingo, and France the western part, which was renamed Saint-Domingue. From that moment onwards, the relationship between the two nations was highly unstable and hostile. The population in the West was mainly black, spoke Kreyòl and practiced Vodou, the religion that was introduced by the African slaves. The majority of people that lived on the eastern part of the island were mestizo, Catholic and Spanish-speaking. The consequence of this diversity was that there was a climate of racial tension that prevailed on both sides. In 1791, the African slaves in Saint-Domingue started revolting against the colonists. The revolution led to a thirteen-year war of liberation in which Napoleon’s army partook as well. Eventually, slavery was abolished, and the first black nation was created. The United States and Europe did not like the example that Haiti had set and did not want to encourage other colonized countries to follow its lead. They boycotted trade with the country and broke all contact for nearly a century after the declaration of independence. Furthermore, the church did not allow Haiti to have priests (Brown 2). As Haiti was now isolated from outside influence, the biggest part of the population stayed loyal to the African traditions that the slaves had brought with them. This explains, for example, why Vodou is still the national religion in Haiti.

It took the eastern part of the island longer to gain independence. The country initially became independent in 1821, but it was almost immediately occupied by Haiti. The Haitian government imposed French as the official language and took measures against the Catholic church. Their actions angered most of the Dominicans, and the idea that they were a separate nation that differed drastically from the other side of the island began to grow more and more.
It could be argued that the two decades of oppression had a great impact on Dominican national identity. In 1844, the Dominican Republic could finally celebrate its independence from Haiti.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States decided to invade and occupy the island. The Woodrow Wilson administration intervened not only because they felt threatened by the political instability of Hispaniola, they were also interested in its strategic position near the shores of the United States and the Panama Canal. Even though it was merely their intention to maintain order, they ended up perpetuating the division created by the previous colonizers. The military governments kept Haiti and the Dominican Republic separate because each nation had different economic debts to pay (Ink 791). The main consequence of this strict division was that it was made impossible for the two countries to join forces and to expel their enemy together. In the end, the Dominican Republic was occupied from 1916 to 1924 and Haiti from 1925 to 1934. During the occupation of the Dominican Republic, the US Marines created a national guard in the country, and were therefore responsible for the military training of a man called Rafael Trujillo. In 1930, six years after their departure, Trujillo seized power. He would rule the Dominican Republic as a dictator, the Generalissimo, for thirty-one years.

In the thirties, there were a large number of Haitian residents in the Dominican Republic. The men mostly worked as braceros (labourers) in the sugarcane fields, while the women often worked as servants in Dominican households. A small group had been born in the Dominican Republic itself to families which had lived in the country for generations. Relatively speaking, they were better off since they lived under more acceptable circumstances than the labourers. However, because of the colour of their skin, they were never truly accepted, and they were denied the right to have a birth certificate or other valuable papers. Rafael Trujillo wanted to get rid of the large Haitian presence that was ‘contaminating’ the Dominican Republic. It was a part of his policy to deny the African heritage of the Dominican Republic. He used to emphasize that the Dominicans were a superior race because of their Spanish origins. That way, he could “other” the black Haitians. Remarkably, Trujillo himself had a Haitian grandmother. He tried to cover up his own racial origins by applying cosmetics (Shemak 91).
In October 1937, Trujillo ordered his army to slaughter all the Haitians they could encounter in the nation, and to make no exception for women or children. His soldiers had to use machetes so that it would appear as if Dominican peasants had defended themselves against revolting Haitians rather than as a genocide ordered by the state. The massacre would go on for a week. In Haitian Krèyol, the event would be remembered as kout kouto, the stabbing. In Spanish, it would be known as El Corte, the cutting (Danticat 299). These short words hardly reflect the true horror of the event. It is the silence that surrounds the words that is significant. It has never been established how many Haitians died during that time, but the general belief is that more than twelve thousand were killed (Roorda 301).

Franklin Roosevelt, who was at that time the president of the United States, faced an important diplomatic decision after being informed about the genocide. Roosevelt was busy promoting the Good Neighbor policy in the thirties, and public awareness of the massacre threatened to undo all the work he had done so far. It turned out that he had underestimated the ability of the dictator to manipulate the system. In the words of Eric Paul Roorda, “the Haitian Massacre of 1937 is a graphic example of the inability of the United States to keep ‘puppet strongmen’ on the string” (303). The massacre coincided with worldwide atrocities such as the rape of Nanking in China. In addition, Trujillo was being compared to Hitler and Mussolini in the international press (Roorda 302). The comparison was not far-fetched, since Trujillo was reportedly imitating Hitler’s behaviour and dressing-code, and even forced the members of his political party to greet each other with a “Sieg Heil”. Ironically, the United States still considered Trujillo to be a valuable ally against the fascism that was rising in Europe and could therefore not openly condemn his actions (Roorda 307). Roosevelt decided it was better to avoid a public statement, and opted for a settlement. Once again, his assessment failed to have the desired effect. Trujillo chose the easy way out, and paid Haiti a large amount of money, without admitting his role in the horrific event. The President of Haiti, Vincent Sténio, accepted the offer and did not pursue the matter any further. Because of Haiti’s isolated status, his country would not have received international aid lest other conflicts would break out (Roorda 309). Trujillo’s “Dominicanization” propaganda successfully turned the massacre into a paternal act that had been inevitable in order to save the country. Jeffrey Alexander points out that when a nation fails to acknowledge a collective trauma, “the perpetrators of these collective sufferings have not been compelled to accept moral responsibility, and the lessons of these social traumas have been neither memorialized
nor ritualized” (27). It is obvious that the racial dynamics that led to the massacre have never ceased to exist and that the situation of the Haitians has hardly improved over the years. It can be argued that one of the reasons for this is the fact that the massacre was never officially recognized as a traumatic event.

The racist ideology that persists in the Dominican Republic is called antihaitianismo. When Danticat was writing *The Farming of Bones*, there were still Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic who were forced to cultivate the sugarcane fields in abominable circumstances. Potable water and electricity were hardly available for the *braceros*, and they were still dehumanized. The term *bracero* itself implies the devaluation of the labourers. It is derived from the word *brazo*, which means “arm”. In other words, the labourers were named after the only part of them that matters: the arms that perform their work (Caminero-Santangelo 22). Even though they were aware of the fact that they were being exploited, they often had no other choice left but to work on the plantations. In the beginning of the new millennium, the sugar industry underwent privatization and there were fewer labourers demanded. The Dominican government decided to reinforce the 186-mile border between the two countries and to start deporting thousands of Haitians to their own country each month (Ink 802). The Haitian immigrants that were still in the Dominican republic had to live in virtual hiding, and were more than ever exposed to constant threat. According to Martin Murphy, the Dominican government used deportations as a tool to maintain control over the immigrants. The Haitians without documents were safe as long as they kept working on the many different plantations (qtd. in McKenzie x).

In the present, the country has suffered a great deal from the earthquake in 2010 and the outbreak of cholera. However, the Dominican Republic keeps on deporting Haitian refugees back to their highly impoverished and unstable country. Even Haitians who have been living in the Dominican Republic for many years are now being deported. The strict immigration policy has provoked a wave of protest. Most of the Haitians in the Dominican Republic are horrified by the idea that they could be forced to return to their homeland. They claim that Haitians are being deported because of their skin colour. The Dominican government refutes the assertion that the deportations would be a racial matter. They defend their actions by calling the deportations merely a matter of preservation. According to them, too many Haitians are living illegally in their country. Moreover, they take jobs away from Dominicans and send their children to schools that are already overcrowded (Tamayo x).
Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and the earthquake has left more than one million people homeless. The argumentation of the Dominican government does not change the fact that for the Haitians, it is the worst possible time to return to their homeland.

2.2. **The traces of past traumas in *The Farming of Bones***

Linda Hutcheon claims that postcolonial literature should be analyzed in light of its “traumatic imperial legacy” (18). This section examines the various traces of Haiti’s traumatic past in *The Farming of Bones*. Notable Caribbean writers such as Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire often refer to the slave trade as the first event that traumatized the Caribbean population. Moreover, they assert that this traumatic event still has an impact on Caribbean societies in a postslavery and postcolonial era (Munro 82). Glissant, for example, addresses the matter in *Caribbean Discours*:

> Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency… our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of “returning to those things of the past” as a possible manifestation of the neurotic’s fear of his past? (qtd. in Munro 82)

Martin Munro adds that “in Haiti, broader Caribbean dilemmas and traumas tend to be magnified and multiplied. History inspires, torments, returns, swirls, and traumatizes endlessly in Haiti” (82). The massacre of 1937 therefore needs to be understood as one element in a long chain of traumas, rather than as a sudden, catastrophic and disruptive event in the history of Haiti. *The Farming of Bones* portrays how the Haitians are still influenced by the multiplicity of traumatic events that have occurred in the country. Moreover, the novel invites the reader to see parallels between past and present atrocities and suggests that the two are inextricably linked. Unlike some other postcolonial writers, Danticat does not aim at liberating the present from the past.

The various references to the period of slavery and revolution in *The Farming of Bones* make it apparent that the legacy of these traumatic events “continues to haunt and shape the cultural consciousness and identity of Haiti”, as Amy Novak asserts (115). King Henry Christophe is for instance often mentioned. The former slave was one of the heroes of the revolution against France in 1804. Henry had refused to surrender to the French generals and their fleets. Reportedly, he had said that he would not “surrender the Cap until it [was] in ashes. And even then [he would] continue to fight on these ashes” (219). He had to burn the
city many times to the ground before it was completely liberated (218). His rebellion inspired the nation and he is still celebrated in numerous accounts. The children in Cap Haïtien grew up with stories about the turbulent revolutionary past of their country. Amabelle notes that her father loved to recount Henry’s heroic acts (46). When she was young, she and the other local children sometimes found golden coins or silver saucers in the ground, which led them to re-imagine their colourful history: “The dream was to find (...) a chest full of gold that a French plantation owner had buried along with the slaves he had killed and interred next to it so the slaves’ souls could be the guardians of the treasure” (219).

There are also more implicit references to the period of slavery. Kongo, one of the older cane workers, has a “map of scars” (62) on his back. The cane stalks that the labourers have to harvest are as sharp as blades and therefore often rip their skin apart. Heather Hewett points out that a scarred back used to be one of the most visual markers of the violence committed within the institution of slavery as well (25). The dehumanization of the cane cutters recalls the severe circumstances in which slaves had to work. The powerful image of a “map of scars” is repeated when Amabelle describes her own mutilated body (229). This aligns the present trauma with the historical trauma. One of the figures that returns in Amabelle’s nightmares is the sugar woman, who wears a “shiny silver muzzle” around her face and wears a collar around her neck “with a clasped lock dangling from it” (132). She appears to descend from the period of slavery, especially when she mentions that the muzzle on her face was given to her “so I’d not eat the sugarcane” (132). The traumatic situation of the two women links the past to the present. When Amabelle asks the sugar woman a question, the voice that comes out of her own mouth is “the voice of the orphaned child at the stream, the child who from then on would only speak to strange voices” (132). Amabelle’s parents had drowned right before her eyes when she was eight. While the slave woman is held captive by her slave owners, Amabelle is trapped in her recurring nightmares. Amabelle mentions that the sugar woman is dancing the “kalandá” (132). After Amabelle has found out that Trujillo is death, she starts dancing the “kalandá” as well (269). She explains that it is a dance her people knew well, “the dance of farewell to a departed tyrant” (270). These references underscore the fact that dance has played an essential role throughout Haitian history.

Next to the slave trade and the revolution, the American invasion is the historical trauma that is referred to the most in the novel. Therefore, Lynn Ink Chun insists that even
though it is not foregrounded, the invasion haunts the text (791). The Americans had only left Haiti three years before the massacre took place, so the wounds were still not healed in 1937. Many of the characters in the novel had lost relatives and loved ones because of the occupation. The most striking example of the hostility with which the Haitians received the American occupation is the murder of Yves’ father by his own mother, Man Rapadou. During the time that Yves’ father spent in prison, the Americans “poisoned” his mind. After he had promised that he would spy on his fellow Haitians, he was released. When his wife found out that he would betray his country, she cooked his favourite food and filled it “with flour-fine glass and rat poison” (277). Only decades after his death is she capable of confessing what she has done, and of seeing her acts as righteous. “Greater than my love for this man was love for my country. I could not let him trade us all, sell us to the Yankis” (277). Ink observes that her act not only highlights her nationalism, it also indicates that those who are viewed as powerless can still attack the inner-workings of an imperial system (800).

In the weeks before the massacre, the tension between the Haitians and the Dominicans is already poignant. It echoes the feeling of distress right before the American invasion (72). When Yves has managed to flee to Haiti after the slaughter, a man comments: “they couldn’t take you. No more than the Yankis could take me” (221). When Amabelle and Yves want to give their testimony to the justice of the peace, they see that he is escorted by soldiers who are wearing the same khaki uniforms as the Dominican soldiers, “a common inheritance from their training during the Yanki invasion of the whole island” (234). When the justice of the peace announces that he will take no more testimonies, the crowd starts protesting. The soldiers, however, immediately start shooting rounds of bullets in the air to keep the people at a distance. They are perfectly capable of dealing with the situation, since the Marines that had trained them were also used to rebellious uprisings. This passage shows that even after the Americans have left, they still exercise power over the country.

One of the themes of the novel is that the present often fails to learn from the past. In *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle repeatedly makes it clear that she does not believe that the Haitians are endangered. The Dominican family she is working for is the closest to kin she has (110). She is loyal to them, and she cannot imagine that the Dominicans would hurt Haitians solely because of their ethnicity. After all, most of the Haitians in the Dominican Republic are cane workers, and are therefore essential for the economy in her eyes. Amabelle fails to grasp the impact of the large history of racism in the country: “It couldn’t be real.
Rumors, I thought. There were always rumors, rumors of war, of land disputes, of one side of the island planning to invade the other. These were the grand fantasies of presidents wanting the whole island to themselves. This could not touch people like me” (140). Laura Brown explains that “when we admit to the immanence of trauma in our lives, when we see it as something more likely to happen than not, we lose our cloak of invulnerability” (108). When Sebastien reproaches Amabelle that she was wrong to think that the Dominicans could not hurt her, she realizes that “when the present itself was truly frightening, I had perhaps purposely chosen not to see it” (143).

When Amabelle is in the hospital, the other victims of the massacre criticize the policy of the contemporary president and commemorate the glorious men of the revolution: Dessaline, Toussaint and Henry (212). According to them, they were still a strong nation in those days. They are sure that unlike President Sténio Vincent, the leaders of the past would not have stayed passive in the wake of the atrocities, they would have defended their people. After what has happened, the victims wonder whether they could have done something differently: “Whatever became of our national creed, ‘L’union fait la force’? What was our unity? Where was our strength?” (213). During their reminiscing, a woman is singing and calling on the old fathers of their independence. Gail Holst-Warhaft claims that lamentations are able to open up a “dialogue with both the dead and the living”; they “have also played an important role in the ratification of official memory and have given women a significant voice” (Saunders and Aghaie 21). In the hospital, the survivors are free to express themselves through stories and songs. The place allows them to be united in their grief, and it is possible that for a moment, the trauma victims will feel less isolated. Martin Munro, however, points out that the narrative also questions the glorification of Haiti’s revolutionary past: “It is ultimately impotent, unable to offer any lasting, comforting sense of the past in the traumatized present” (95).

When the survivors have discovered that the government has stopped taking testimonies, their disillusionment in President Vincent reaches a new height. The enraged crowd starts to protest and ultimately sets the police station on fire. The first thing that the flames catch is the photograph of their president, and more specifically, the image of the medal that Trujillo had given him in the early thirties as a token of the “eternal friendship” between the nations. The recent events had made it more than clear that the relation between the two countries was more fragile than ever. After the photograph has been burned, the
wooden doors of the building catch fire, but the concrete walls “do not even scorch” (236). This fire echoes how Henry used to set the city on fire. However, while Henry’s rebellion was successful and led to glory, the desperate attempt of the survivors of the massacre to ventilate their frustration ended with a fizzle. The hope that lingered in the atmosphere after Haiti had won independence is now gone.

It is important to keep in mind that the constant humiliations and abuses that the Haitians are exposed to have shaped the society they live in. The continuing struggle to survive has led them to accept suffering as a part of life. A phrase that is therefore often heard in Haiti is “Moun fèt pou mouri”, “people are born to die” (Brown 4). In The Farming of Bones, there is also evidence that the Haitian immigrants are used to living in a hostile environment. They are always anticipating the accidents that are awaiting them. When the news about Joël’s death is spread, for example, nobody acts with surprise: “Things like that happened all the time to the cane workers; they were the most unprotected of our kind” (71). After Amabelle’s group had been attacked, Odette comments that they “never lived lives of certainty” (197). Another expression that reflects Haitian culture is “mizè Mennen parespè,” which means that if you admit that you are suffering, people will no longer respect you (Brown 5). For instance, even though Man Rapadou has experienced more misery than bearable, she never wallows in her grief: “she seemed to be the only one who could laugh out of sadness” (224). Since Haitians cannot prevent traumatic events from happening, they have no other choice but to find strategies to integrate their suffering into their lives, and to deal with the injuries caused by past traumas. They cannot endlessly dwell on the same traumatic event, when the next one is right behind the corner.
Chapter 3. The representation of trauma in *The Farming of Bones*

Just like most of the Euro-American literary texts that illustrate the traditional ideas of trauma theory, *The Farming of Bones* has a non-linear form. Danticat’s novel is composed out of two narratives. The first-person retrospective narrative is chronological and covers the story that begins with the birth of Señora Valencia’s twins and ends with Amabelle’s submersion in the river. The fragments in bold, on the other hand, are atemporal and encompass Amabelle’s memories and nightmares. These isolated fragments interrupt the main narrative and repeat the traumatic memories that Amabelle’s linear testimony tries to conceal. They represent all the things that have to remain unsaid, and draw attention to the significance of the silences of trauma. Amy Novak argues that *The Farming of Bones* has a “spectral narrative economy,” that “embraces rather than denies the ambiguity and spectral nature of traumatic memory” (95). The narrative “refuses to narrativize” Amabelle’s traumatic memories and instead “unleashes them” (111). The first section of this chapter gives an overview of Amabelle’s traumatic experiences and examines how the text itself is affected by trauma. The second section focuses on a couple of the most important phrases and images that are echoed throughout the novel. The analysis of the novel will take into account that the cultural framework of the protagonist influences the way in which she experiences trauma.

3.1. The multiple traumas in the life of the protagonist

*The Farming of Bones* primarily focuses on the struggle of the characters to survive and to live with themselves in the aftermath of the massacre of 1937. However, even though the slaughter is presented as the main historical event in the novel, it becomes clear that some of the characters were already traumatized before this dark episode in the history of the nation. As Laura Brown observes in “Not outside the range”, there are “many layers of trauma” that can be “peeled off by what appears initially to be only one traumatic event or process” (110). Amabelle, for example, is haunted by what Martin Munro calls “her deep, many-layered sense of guilt” (85). She applies different strategies to find a way to work through her traumas, such as trying to locate an addressee, engaging in a daily routine in life or embarking on a quest for truth, but all of her attempts seem to fail.

The text and the structure of *The Farming of Bones* mirror Amabelle’s traumatized body and mind. For instance, the disruptive fragments in bold indicate that Amabelle lives in double existence. Van der Kolk and van der Hart explain that:
Amabelle’s narrative is a mixture of past and present and is marked by her feelings of guilt. Her traumatic past determines the way in which she interprets present traumas. Since she cannot work through the traumatic events that keep piling up, they all blend together in her nightmares.

The death of Amabelle’s parents can be regarded as her primary trauma. They drowned while crossing the Massacre River during stormy weather. Amabelle had to witness in agony how the cresting river carried her parents away. She noticed that they were signalling a message to her, but they had disappeared before she could grasp what they meant: “I thought that if I relived the moment often enough, the answer would become clear, that they had wanted either for us all to die together or for me to go on living, even if by myself” (309). Amabelle will never know the answer, no matter how many times she relives the moment in her dreams or returns to the river. Her nightmares endlessly punish her for surviving. After Amabelle’s parents had disappeared from her sight, she stayed at the riverside until she was found by Señora Valencia and her father. The bodies of her parents never surfaced.

In Alegría, Amabelle’s adopted city, she is living a tranquil life as Señora Valencia’s servant and as Sebastien’s lover. At this stage of the novel, the chronological chapters and the chapters in bold are systematically juxtaposed. Amabelle often enlightens Sebastien about the recurring nightmare she has of the drowning of her parents. Sebastien wants to ease her suffering by changing her nightmare into a pleasant dream. He encourages her to imagine that her parents did not drown, but died a natural death years later and that she had moved to the Dominican Republic because she knew that he was waiting for her (55). This scene recalls Pierre Janet’s attempt to help his traumatized patients overcome their traumatic memories by suggesting alternative scenarios that were less horrific. One of his patients, for example, was haunted by the image of nude corpses. Janet told her to imagine that they had clothes on and that one of them got up and walked away. Van der Kolk and van der Hart elaborate on the theory behind Janet’s therapy sessions: “Once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory
starts losing its power over current experience. By imagining these alternative scenarios, many patients are able to soften the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror” (178). However, Amabelle and Sebastien do not really find comfort in their daydreams. Right after Sebastien’s effort to console Amabelle, he starts talking about his own traumas. Amabelle reaches up and presses her hand on his mouth: “We had made a pact to change our unhappy tales into happy ones, but he could not help himself” (56). Even though they have gained linguistic control over their experience, they are still held captive by their traumatic memories.

Valencia has also suffered loss in life. When her son Rafi dies, she reminisces about the moment she met Amabelle: “You were sitting on a big rock, watching the water for an apparition (...) Do you remember?” (91). She does not know that Amabelle relives that exact moment almost every night. The only difference is that Amabelle actually witnesses an apparition in her dreams: “In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit or the river, above the current that drowned her” (207). While Amabelle pities Valencia for the loss of her son, she secretly envies her as well. At least Rafi would have a proper burial: “she could place her hands on it, her son’s final bed. My parents had no coffins” (93). This is echoed in one of the chapters in bold: “I have always wished for this same kind of light on the grave of my parents” (101). The fact that her parents were not buried is constitutive of trauma for Amabelle.

Funeral rites play a significant role in Haitian culture. Karen McCarthy Brown points out that Haitians believe that the spirits of the people who have not been buried according to tradition will roam forever (7). The deceased have to be entombed in the family grave before their souls can join those of their ancestors. Moreover, when Haitians are separated from the land they belong to, they risk losing the power and guidance of their ancestral spirits (Brown 6). The younger generations of Haitians frequently have no choice but to leave their impoverished hometown behind and to settle down across the border. While they are living in their adopted country, they long to meet people that were born in the same place they were:

It was a way of being joined to your old life through the presence of another person. At times you could sit for a whole evening with such individuals, just listening to their existence unfold, from the house where they were born to the hill where they wanted to be buried. It was their way of returning home. (73)
Even though the Haitian immigrants often do not feel connected to their homeland anymore, they share the wish to be buried there. It is as if they hope that this will compensate for their misplacement in a country that has rejected them. Man Denise, Sebastien’s mother, claims that Haitians who die young are cheated. When people are dying, they “crave to be near the bones of [their] own people” (242). Young people, however, often think that they are invincible and do not recognize death when it is sneaking up on them. They only realize that they should have returned home when it is too late. Their bodies cannot be buried near the bones of their own family, and their spirits will never find rest. Her children “had to look death in the face, even before they knew what it was” (242).

Amabelle as well fails to recognize death when it is standing at the threshold of her town. Repeatedly, she is being told about the upcoming dangers that the Haitians are facing, but she refuses to believe it. When it finally dawns to her that the rumours are true, she urges Sebastien and his sister Mimi to leave Don Carlos’ mill and to go to the church. Doctor Javier had told her that the priests were gathering all the Haitians there to help them escape the approaching violence. While Amabelle is still preparing her flight, she finds out that the Haitians who had already assembled at the church had been arrested, including Sebastien and Mimi. Together with Yves, Sebastien’s best friend, she decides to run away, and to travel to Dajabón, a town at the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The Haitians that were taken would most likely be there.

Her abrupt departure was already forecasted by Kongo, one of the cane workers. Kongo had lost his son Joël a few days before the massacre and had buried him in a place that only he could find. When Amabelle is visiting him for the last time, he draws a large letter V on the floor: “I make this mark for you, (...) because we’re one departing on two trails. Your trail is the trail of rivers and mountains, and on your journey you will require protection” (146). His prediction is mirrored in the narrative when the next chapter begins. For the first time, the chronological narrative is not interrupted by a chapter in bold. The narrator describes the road that lies ahead of her: “A crossroads split our trail into two paths: one led back to the valley, and the other up to the mountains” (167). The moment she chooses the path that leads to the mountains, there is no way back. During the journey, the present becomes just as traumatizing as the past. The narrative that covers this period is not interrupted by segments in bold.
Along the way, Amabelle and Yves join a group of refugees. They befriend the disabled man Tibon and the couple Odette and Wilner. When the refugees reach Dajabón, they notice that it is “lit up like a carnival parade” and that all the people are celebrating (188). They gather from the many conversations around them that the Generalissimo is in town and that he is giving a speech in which he promises that “the problems with the Haitians would soon be solved” (189). His words incite the crowd, and a group of young Dominicans decides to take manners into their own hands. When the Dominicans have spotted Amabelle and the others, they corner them and start yelling: “Que diga perejil” (193). Since Amabelle is raised in the Dominican Republic, she believes that if they had only given her the chance, she would have been able to pronounce the word correctly, as she has often done. Nevertheless, the Dominicans stuff her mouth with parsley and start beating her up before she can even attempt to articulate the word perejil.

Odette and Wilner help Amabelle and Yves stand up after the crowd has left them for dead. Still in shock, Amabelle notices that Tibon has not made it out alive. Amabelle desperately wants to explain Odette that they cannot leave Tibon behind, that they should bury him, but her mouth is severely wounded and she is unable to express herself (196). Amabelle’s inability to speak mirrors the muteness that survivors experience after being traumatized. The small group of survivors has no other choice but to flee to Haiti. When Amabelle and Odette are already wading through the river, Wilner gets shot. At that moment, Amabelle is afraid that Odette will yell and betray their position, so she seals her mouth with her hand and presses her down. Odette does not fight her, but simply “abandoned her body to the water and the lack of air” (202). Amabelle had not intended to smother her and tries to convince herself of that: “All I had wanted was for her to be still” (202, 205). Her guilt will continue to haunt her for the rest of her life: “Wherever I go, I will be standing over her body” (205). The river is now not only associated with her parents’ death, but also with Odette’s. In Amabelle’s traumatized mind, the river becomes the place where the dead assemble: “Each time I closed my eyes I saw the river and imagined Sebastien and Mimi drowning the way my mother and father and Odette had” (227).

Yves and Amabelle are found the next day by a doctor and a priest who were looking for survivors. Both of them are taken to a hospital to recover. When a nun in one of the tent clinics sees Amabelle, she comments that “she does not look as bad as some” (206). However, Amabelle’s pain is just as real. She is still unable to speak, and her knees and jaw are severely
injured. Her body is now a “marred testament”, and continually reminds her of what she has
endured and what she has lost (229). When she is staying in the hospital, she mentions that
she sees “Odette’s dying face” right before falling asleep (207). The dream sequence that
follows starts immediately after this sentence. For the first time in the narrative, the section in
bold is not confined to a separate chapter. The impression is created that Amabelle’s
traumatic memories are now affecting the main narrative as well. She overhears the stories of
the other survivors. Every one of them had been forced to leave the dead or near dead behind
at one point during their journey. Now they all “looked back and recorded the moments”
(212). Amabelle identifies with the other victims, and also wonders “[w]hat could have been
done differently” (212), and above all: “how can we not hate ourselves for the people we left
behind?” (213). The difference between Amabelle and the rest of the survivors is that while
Amabelle is reluctant to move on, the others immediately begin to make plans for the future
and dream of being reunited with their family (213). Their eagerness to pick up the threads of
their lives reflects the general attitude of Haitian society towards suffering.

When Amabelle is strong enough to travel again, she follows Yves to their hometown
Cap Haitien in the hope that Sebastien will be waiting for her. Once Amabelle is back, the
place does not feel like home to her anymore. She had nobody waiting for her to return. Yves,
on the other hand, is cordially welcomed by his mother, Man Rapadou. According to Karen
McCarthy Brown, family occupies an important position in Haitian culture: “Both men and
women who no longer live with their extended families feel the loss acutely” (7). Just like
Yves, Sebastien had lost his father when he was a child and had to leave his mother behind in
order to build a better life on the other side of the border. Sebastien’s loss manifests itself in
his nightmares: “Ay pobrecita manman mwen. My poor mother” (25). Man Denise, his
mother, had given him and his sister a bracelet made of coffee beads before they left. When
Man Denise thought of her children, she touched the beads of her own bracelet in an attempt
to feel them near. Once, when she was too anxious, she broke the thread of the bracelet by
tugging too hard. She could only recuperate three single beads, which she kept in her pocket
from then on. The three beads could metaphorically represent her own life and that of her
children.

As time passes by after the massacre, there is still no trace of Sebastien and Mimi.
Many refugees who arrive in The Cap visit Man Denise to testify that they had witnessed how
Sebastien and his sister were slaughtered. Even though nobody knows what happened to their
bodies, the most likely scenario is that they were thrown in a mass grave. Man Denise accuses her visitors of crushing her last sparkle of hope: “I wish I had my hopes that they were living someplace, even if they never did come back to see me again” (242). The knowledge of the death of her children does not enable a process of mourning for her. Just like Amabelle, she continues to see Sebastien and Mimi in her dreams: “Leave me now, (...) I’m going to dream up my children” (243). One day, when Amabelle goes over to Man Denise’s house, she discovers that she has vanished. A neighbour informs her that Man Denise had buried a couple of coffee beads in her garden before taking off to her family in Port-au-Prince: “Maybe she was tired of being told the same thing, in so many ways (...) Might be she went someplace where only her children would find her if they come back” (251). The burial of the beads can be interpreted in different ways. It could indicate that Man Denise does crave for closure, and that she wants to bury the past and move on. However, the fact that she still believes that she can go “someplace where only her children would find her” (251) challenges this interpretation. It is possible that Man Denise moves to Port-au-Prince because she knows that she will die soon, and because she wants to be buried near the bones of her family. Perhaps she needed to leave a trace of herself and her children behind before she could return to her hometown.

Amabelle has nowhere to go, so she stays in Cap Haïtien. A few weeks after the massacre, Yves enlightens Amabelle that justices of the peace are taking testimonies of the survivors. He explains that “the Generalissimo has not said that he caused the killing, but he agreed to give money to the affected persons” (231). Yves warns her that he is not sure whether they would give money to Amabelle, because “they ask you to bring papers. They ask you to bring proof” (231). Nevertheless, Amabelle and Yves decide to go to the police station and to give their testimony to the justice of the peace. When Amabelle and Yves arrive, one of the other victims explains the procedure to Amabelle: "He writes your name in the book and he says he will take your story to President Sténio Vincent so you can get your money (...) Then he lets you talk and lets you cry and he asks you if you have papers to show that all these people died" (101). However, most Haitians do not have documents and their bodily injuries are not accepted as valid proof of what they have been through. The government is only interested in the statistics and in the official documentation. When all the money that the Dominican Republic has offered is distributed, the officials of state stop taking
testimonies. The justice of the peace leaves Cap Haïtien before Yves and Amabelle can tell their story.

Yves attempts to console himself by cultivating his father’s land. Amabelle notes that “he had always lived for work. The two most important cycles of [his life] were the cane harvest and the dead season. Now all he could do was plant and sow to avoid the dead season” (263). Being able to make things grow gives Yves some inner peace. He wants Amabelle to find a similar form of rest, and informs her that the priests are writing down the testimonials of the victims. He knows that Amabelle needs to testify and he hopes that the information he has provided will help her: “This was his gift to me, like the gift the earth had given him in pushing his beans back up in a different form” (246). Amabelle assumes that Yves’ work helps him forget, but she is afraid that she will never be able to move on. The future frightens her even more than the past. She conjures the image of the victims in the hospital up, and imagines they have all managed to integrate their suffering into their lives and to move on. She wants to ask them “how it was that they could be so strong, what their secret was, how they could wash their lives clean, if only for brief moments, from the past” (247). Amabelle ultimately decides to visit the priests to find out if they have more information about the Haitian victims from Alegría. When she arrives, the priests inform her that they have stopped letting people tell their “terrible stories” to them, since they could offer them nothing but bread and prayers (254).

Bennett and Kennedy observe that a trauma can be doubled when the reality of the traumatic event is not acknowledged (11). The struggle of oppressed individuals to regain their voice is one of the main themes of postcolonial narratives. However, as Munro asserts: “Danticat implicitly eschews the more conventional contemporary movement of ‘coming to voice’ in postcolonial women’s writing” (92). The protagonist does not “move out of silence and into ‘voice’ or agency (...) the narrator largely remains in her traumatized, voiceless state” (92). Since Amabelle cannot locate an addressee to whom she can tell her story, the voiceless chapters in bold become testimonies instead. As she says herself, her dreams are “visitations of [her] words for the absent justice of [the] peace, for the Generalissimo” (265). It becomes apparent that even though her voice has been silenced, it has not lost its power: “It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside” (266). Amabelle’s silence is a statement.
After all the traumatic events Amabelle has survived, she lives in a detached state. She strolls through life “like a ghost” (243), being held captive in the no-man’s land between past and present. Trauma theorists such as van der Kolk and van der Hart assert that dissociation is one of the common symptoms after having experienced trauma: “Lack of proper integration of intensely emotionally arousing experiences into the memory system results in dissociation and the formation of traumatic memories” (163). Saunders and Aghaie, on the other hand, wonder whether “processes such as dissociation or the inability to register a wound to the psyche [can] be, rather than unconscious or inevitable mechanisms, processes (consciously or unconsciously) deployed for political or ideological ends” (17). The fact that the traumatic experiences of the Haitians were not acknowledged by the government suggests that dissociation is not merely a social construction that benefits political actors. Moreover, Amabelle’s condition proves that some of the definitions of trauma can be extended to non-Western societies.

Yves as well seems to be detached from the reality that is unfolding around him. He often speaks “with the numbness of shock in his voice” (169). He is the only one who is not interested in the stories of Tibon and the other victims, and he speaks about the fate of other survivors “as if he were no longer linked to the slaughter” (231). When he is older, he is still deeply traumatized by the massacre and hardly speaks at all anymore. Amabelle mentions that she can “read” the sentences that are inscribed on his body: “He spoke so little now that I could read whole phrases on his sweaty knotted brows” (270). He has chosen not to testify, because he does not believe in the potential of oral testimony for justice. Dori Laub asserts that when traumatized victims choose not to tell their story, “the events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life” (64). In Sebastien’s case, his traumatic memories have profoundly affected his senses:

The slaughter had affected him in certain special ways: He detested the smell of sugarcane (...) and loathed the taste of parsley; he could not swim in rivers; the sound of Spanish being spoken—even by Haitians—made his eyes widen, his breath quicken, his face cloud with terror, his lips unable to part one from the other and speak. (273)

One night, when Yves and Amabelle are lying in bed, he finally admits to her that he feels guilty for surviving. Yves should have been hit by the car instead of Joël, but Joël had jumped in front of him to save him. Furthermore, Yves had witnessed how Sebastien and the
other Haitians were being taken from the church. He had wanted to run forward, but he could not move. Finally, when Wilner was shot at the riverside, Yves had wanted to swim to him and collect his body so he could have a proper burial in his homeland, but once again, he was unable to do so: “because the more people I see die, the more I want to guard my own life” (249). He is being tormented by the knowledge that unlike Joël, he is incapable of being the hero and of saving other people’s lives. At her turn, Amabelle opens up to Yves, and confesses that she feels guilty as well. When Yves tells her none of what has happened is Amabelle’s fault, she feels relieved. After their confession, they make love, and they are “joined in a way that [they] never could speaking together, or even crying together” (250). When Yves weeps, his tears fall on Amabelle, and she notices that they taste like her own. However, their moment of intimacy does not have a therapeutic effect: “As he rolled back on his side of the bed, I felt an even larger void in the aching pit of my stomach” (250). From that moment onwards, their presence would remind each other of “great betrayal” (270). Both have found someone with whom they can share the unspeakable, but their confession does not soothe their feeling of guilt. The ghosts that haunt them both prevent them from finding happiness together.

At one point, Amabelle realizes that she must leave the past behind if she wants to have a future: “For so long this had been my life, but it was all the past. Now we all had to try and find the future” (184). After she has realized that she will not be reunited with Sebastien right away, she has no choice but to make herself at home in Man Rapadou’s house. She explains that she needs a dull routine in life to manage her pain and to cope with her traumatic memories: “a series of sterile acts that I could perform without dedication or effort, a life where everything was constantly the same, where every day passed exactly like the one before” (262). When she is older, it seems she has obtained this routine. However, because her body aches all the time, her life is still a continuous struggle. She cannot simply forget the past and lose herself in the present. As Novak concurs, “the physical traces of violence occupy and shape her present” (106). From time to time, Amabelle is unable to leave her bed, “times when I had too much lint in my throat, or an aching arm that prevented me from sewing, when the joint of my knee would chime without stop” (269). These moments interrupt her “routine of sewing and sleeping and having the same dreams every night” (269). Novak points out that Amabelle’s inability to put the past behind her is reflected in the narrative: “As Amabelle’s linear narrative seeks to put the past in order, the memories in the
...bold print sections—by entering the novel and making the past present—demonstrate the impossibility of doing so” (Novak 110).

Now that Amabelle is older, it bothers her more and more that the people she has lost did not receive a proper burial: “The more days go by, the more I think of Jöel’s grave. (Of Wilner’s, Odette’s, Mimi’s and Sebastien’s too.) I could no more find these graves than the exact star that exploded and fell from the sky the night each of them perished” (265). She does not want to think about the death of the people between parentheses, but they pop up in her thoughts anyway. In the last nightmare sequence in bold, Amabelle realizes that Sebastien’s ghost is slipping away from her and that she is not prepared for his departure. She begs him to tell her whether he and his sister had suffered when they died, but he remains silent. His silence is meaningful. She will never know what exactly happened and his ghost cannot help her find closure. She confesses to him that her tale of survival is not heroic; she has chosen for “a living death” because she does not have the courage to move on, unlike the other survivors of the massacre she knows (283). The only thing she can do to bind his spirit to her, is to return to him: “I am coming to your waterfall” (283). She holds on to the belief that his ghost is still inside the cave behind the waterfall where they first made love (282). Because her mind still cannot process the loss of her lover, she needs to physically return to the Dominican Republic.

Amabelle is able to find someone who is willing to take her across the border, even though she does not have any papers. When she is finally back in Alegría, she discovers that everything has changed since she has left (289). Even though returning to the place of exile had been inevitable, the place has become lost to her (Munro 90). She cannot find the waterfall she was looking for and therefore decides to ask Señora Valencia for help. When Valencia is informing Amabelle of all the things that have happened during Amabelle’s departure, she unknowingly confirms Amabelle’s worst fears. None of the cane workers that had stayed in Don Carlos’ mill during the massacre had been killed. In other words, if Amabelle had not convinced Sebastien to leave the mill and to seek shelter in the church, he and his sister might have been still alive (300). Señora Valencia brings Amabelle to the stream she has been desperately trying to locate. When they arrive at the waterfall, Amabelle discovers that it is different from the vision she has guarded in her mind. She is afraid that time has distorted her memories or that they have arrived at another cascade altogether (302). Her quest to find her lost lover has failed: “He didn’t come out and show himself. He stayed
inside the waterfall” (306). Sebastien’s story remains an absent presence in the narrative: “His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tale, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow. His absence is my shadow; his breath my dreams” (281). As Martin Munro asserts: “the novel insists on the unknowability of the truth of the traumatizing past” (93), which “indicates that the past holds no real memory of the wholeness of the self; that the past, like the present, is in truth a disordered series of fragments” (94).

At the end of the novel, Amabelle immerses in the stream that separates Haiti from the Dominican Republic. Amy Novak sees a parallel between the beginning and the ending of the novel, and suggests that the narrative structure is circular (109). The novel starts with a dedication: “in confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers. Amabelle Désir” (x). It is possible that Amabelle starts narrating her story to Metrès Dlo when she is floating in the river in the final passage. Amabelle had already uttered the wish to “find a place to lay [her testimony] down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (266). In the river, her story will neither be scattered nor remain buried. Heather Hewett claims that Amabelle “engages in an internal, if submerged, dialogue with Vodou” by dedicating her narrative to Metrès Dlo (137). Amabelle could not find an addressee that was willing to acknowledge the reality of her trauma, so instead, she tells her story to an internal witness she has established herself. According to Dori Laub, this “creative act” can substitute “for the lack of witnessing in real life” (71). In the river, the place that is associated with her loss and grief, she can finally look to her dreams “for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow” (310). This could indicate that Amabelle is not seeking for closure anymore, nor for a way to expel her traumatic memories. Perhaps, she is finally able to embrace the losses she has suffered and to face whatever comes next. She is “looking for the dawn” (310).

3.2. Echoes and repeated imagery

According to Caruth, “the response to the [traumatic] event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). In The Farming of Bones, the narrative itself is affected by trauma. The chapters in bold compulsively repeat crucial events and expressions from Amabelle’s linear testimony (Novak
When Valencia is mourning her dead son, for instance, she confides in Amabelle that she feels “that [she] will never be a whole woman, for the absence of Mami’s face” (104). Amabelle as well has lost her mother at a young age. The connection between the women is established in one of Amabelle’s dreams about her own mother, in which she literally repeats Valencia’s words: “I will never be a whole woman (...) for the absence of your face” (208). This illustrates that the bold sequences are spectres that haunt the main narrative.

Cathy Caruth furthermore claims that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event” (4). In one of the fragments in bold, Amabelle remembers that Sebastien used to say that he was haunted by the crooning of pigeons: “he imagines that the way pigeons moan is the same way ghosts cry when they are too lonely or too sad, when they have been dead so long that they have forgotten how to speak their own names” (25). Sebastien is just like Amabelle a deeply traumatized character. After his father had been killed by a hurricane, Sebastien saw himself forced to leave his mother behind and to move to the Dominican Republic. Amabelle recalls that “the pigeons always make him draw in his breath, suck his teeth, and say: “Ay, pobrecita manman mwen. My poor mother” (25). When Amabelle visits Man Denise, Sebastien’s mother, she finds out that he had a cage full of pigeons in Haiti, but that they had all died during the hurricane (239). The pigeons had become the symbol of a much greater loss, namely the loss of his family and sense of belonging.

There are multiple references to the Citadel of King Henry in *The Farming of Bones*. The monument can be regarded as a *lieu de mémoire*, a concept coined by Pierre Nora. He asserts that “memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects” (qtd. in Saunders and Aghaie 22). King Henry had given the order to build the large citadel that still looms over Cap Haïtien in order to defend the city against intruders. In the novel, the monument is associated with Amabelle’s childhood memories. She used to play in the fortress because she always felt safe inside of its walls. Now, it protects her from intruding thoughts and ghosts. Whenever Amabelle feels sad or wants to run away from an unpleasant truth, she closes her eyes and invokes the image of the citadel:

> Each time I closed my eyes I saw the river and imagined Sebastien and Mimi drowning the way my mother and father and Odette had. To escape these thoughts, I envisioned Henry I’s citadel as I had seen it again that afternoon, its closeness to the sky, its distance from the river; With my childhood visions of being inside of it, protected, I fell asleep. (227)
It is striking that the sentence that follows this passage is enclosed in parentheses: “(When you have so few remembrances, you cling to them tightly and repeat them over and over again so time will not erase them)” (45). It appears as if this sentence is invading the narrative to explain why Amabelle keeps conjuring up the face of Sebastien and whatever memories she has left of her parents as well.

When Amabelle has been living in Haiti for over twenty years, she finally returns to the citadel. She discovers that the glorious monument she remembers is now merely a tourist attraction. She decides to follow a guide and his group on a tour and overhears him say that “famous people never truly die (...) It is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (280). His utterance troubles her and continues to linger in her mind. Her feeling of unease is reflected in the dream sequence that follows. The sentence “his name is Sebastien Onius” is repeated four times, and the words of the guide are echoed literally: “Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (281, 282). Amabelle attempts to keep the memory of her deceased loved ones alive by stating their names on various occasions. Her main concern is to validate the existence of her lover. It is therefore significant that the novel begins with the sentence “his name is Sebastien Onius” (1). She also commemorates her parents in the chapters in bold: “her name was Irelle Pradelle” (14), and “my father’s name was Antoine Désir” (33). She does not want history to forget the people she has lost, so she grants them eternal existence in her narrative. When the group is standing by Henry’s grave, the guide tells the tourists the story of King Henry’s life. What surprises Amabelle is that he recasts the king as a cruel and heartless figure: “The king was sometimes cruel. He used to march battalions of soldiers off the mountain, ordering them to plunge their deaths as a disciplinary example to the others” (279). The description that the guide offers differs drastically from the heroic picture Amabelle’s father used to paint of King Henry and his citadel. This passage points out that memory can be distorted, and that there does not exist a singular version of history.

In one of Amabelle’s dreams, she remembers that her father used to make Christmas lanterns shaped like the citadel. She asks him if he could create a lantern of his own face, so she could carry him with her the entire year. Her request makes him laugh: “It would be too vain, he says, to spend more time than God reproducing one’s self” (117). This is clearly a reference to Rafael Trujillo’s personality cult. The Generalissimo wanted to immortalize
himself by renaming everything in his honour. The name of the capital Santo Domingo changed into ‘Ciudad Trujillo’, the highest peak of the nation was rechristened ‘Pico Trujillo’, and so forth (35). The critique pronounced by Amabelle’s father is uttered by Papi as well. He had emigrated from Spain because he had wanted to escape from the armies and officers that dreamt of seeing their names “on plaques, on roads and bridges” (137). However, while he is observing his daughter’s husband, a soldier that belongs to Trujillo’s Guardia, he realizes that men with delusions of grandeur are everywhere. Rafael Trujillo would ultimately die “as he was being driven out of the capital city on a highway named after him” (267). The novel criticizes the great men with names that are remembered and pays respect to the nameless that fell through the cracks of history.

Another recurrent image in the novel is the cave behind the waterfall, where Amabelle and Sebastien first made love. Throughout the narrative, the cave is being referred to as a safe haven (1, 13, 100, 281, 310). When Amabelle has had another nightmare about the death of her parents, for instance, Sebastien soothes her by promising that he will take her “back into the cave across the river” (1). Moreover, the cave is associated with light: “On the inside of the cave, there is always light, day and night” (100). After Amabelle has realized that Sebastien will not return to her in his material form, she wants to return to the cave. Not only does she believe that his spirit is still inside of it, she needs to enter the cave once more in order to escape the darkness of her traumatic memories. Darkness is related to death and to people that are beyond healing. In one of the segments in bold, Sebastien urges Amabelle to talk: “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” (13).

While the cave is the symbol that is connected to Sebastien, Amabelle’s father is associated with laughter and Amabelle’s mother with eternity. Her father had a joyful personality and Amabelle can still recall his smile. Her mother, on the other hand, was always tranquil, spoke very little, and smiled seldom. When she appears in one of Amabelle’s dreams, she explains that she “was saving her smile for when [Amabelle] needed it” (208). Right before she vanishes again, she assures Amabelle that she has always loved her, and concludes with: “You, my eternity” (208). She thereby echoes the words that the sugar woman had uttered in one of Amabelle’s dreams: “I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity” (133). Consequently, it can be argued that Amabelle’s mother is connected to the sugar woman. Amabelle’s narrative gives both women the voice and the face that history had
denied them. According to Susana Vega-González, this “is the only hope for eternity and remembrance they may have against racial oppression and historical marginalization” (17). At the end of the novel, Amabelle meets Pwofèse, a deeply traumatized man who is perceived as insane by the other Haitians: “I wanted to ask him (...) to carry me into the river, into Sebastien’s cave, my father’s laughter, my mother’s eternity” (310). When she enters the river, she engages in an act of commemoration.

The river is another powerful image that is often reiterated and that has a plethora of meanings in the novel. The Massacre River received its loaded name in 1728 right after Spanish colonists had killed thirty French pirates (Vega-González 10). In The Farming of Bones, Valencia mentions that she learned about this event in one of her history lessons (91). This indicates that the Spanish origins of the Dominicans were already celebrated in official history even before Trujillo was in power. The massacre of 1937 was also the culmination of the hatred between two opposite groups. For Amabelle, the river is connected to her losses as it is the site where her parents and Odette died. She “hear[s] the weight of the river all the time” (266). She attributes negative connotations to the river, and evokes the image of a “river of blood” in one of her nightmares (265).

The deaths of Amabelle’s parents and Odette do not only haunt Amabelle’s dreams, but also affect her attitude regarding water. Valencia remembers that Amabelle was always drawn to water when she was little: “When I didn’t see you, I always knew where to find you, peeking into some current, looking for your face” (303). This is an allusion to Amabelle’s trauma of dislocation. Since her parents died, she is an exile in a strange country. At the riverside, she lost her identity and her “face”, so she often returns in an attempt to recuperate a fragment of her former self. Just like the cave and the citadel, the river is a symbol for Amabelle’s desire for a safe haven. Moreover, the river is a “cathartic, spiritual place” for the Haitians (Shemak 96). They cleanse their bodies in the stream, and come together to mourn and to commemorate the losses of their community. The contradictory symbolism of the river reflects the dual nature of water in Haitian Vodou (Houlberg 31).

There are various instances in the novel in which water is attributed powerful or magical qualities. Amabelle remembers the moment right before her parents entered the river: “My father reaches into the current and sprinkles his face with the water, as if to salute the spirit of the river and request her permission to enter. My mother crosses herself three times
and looks up at the sky before she climbs on my father’s back” (51). Nevertheless, the spirit of the river did not save them from drowning. It is possible that Amabelle’s father was saluting the water spirit Lasirèn, who “has the ability to bring riches and romance, but she can also be violent, and even has the power to lure mortals to a watery death” (Houlberg 32). In Haitian Vodou, it is believed that the spirits of the dead can be summoned through water (Brown 9). When Amabelle is staying in the hospital, she calls for the ghost of her mother through the river: “In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her” (207). In Amabelle’s imagination, her mother has become one with Mètrès Dlo, the mother of the rivers. Near the end of the novel, Valencia and Amabelle are watching the river “until it [is] a perfect mirror” (303). According to Marilyn Houlberg, one of the leading experts on the culture of Haitian Vodou, mirrors are associated with water: “both have reflective surfaces that can be used to communicate with other worlds” (31). As Amabelle states: “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. Odette and Wilner not coming out is what makes them dead” (264).
Chapter 4. The role of the dead in The Farming of Bones

Amabelle is always accompanied by the ghosts and shadows of the people she has lost. When she is not being haunted by them, she deliberately conjures them up. According to Sam Durrant, postcolonial narratives are at the intersection between two commitments: psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Psychoanalysis focuses on the individual; it has a “commitment to the well-being of the subject” and “encourages us to exorcise our ghosts, to come to term with loss and move on” (Durrant 9). Derridean deconstruction, on the other hand, has a “commitment to the other,” and “urges us to live with ghosts” (Durrant 9). Postcolonial narratives urge the characters both to come to terms with their loss and to learn to live with their phantoms. In addition, it is important to take into account that many non-Western cultures attribute more significance to the relation between the living and the dead than Western cultures do. In Amabelle’s religion, mourning does not entail the exorcism of ghosts. This chapter therefore examines the role of the spectres in The Farming of Bones in relation to Haitian Vodou.

Vodou does not have a national apparatus in Haiti – such as a priesthood or a national church – but it is widely practiced in the entire country and can therefore be regarded as the national religion (Bellegarde-Smith 111). The other side of the island has stayed loyal to the Catholic belief that was introduced by the Spanish colonists. The most devout Catholic in The Farming of Bones is indisputably Juana, the Dominican maid of Señora Valencia’s family. She often scolds Amabelle for not being a believer (30). However, the multiple traces of Vodou in Amabelle’s narrative suggest that she is religious as well. Although there is no evidence that she actively practices Haitian Vodou, this religion could help her to make sense of the traumatic experiences she undergoes in life. According to Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, Vodou influences the worldview of all Haitians, even if they have migrated or have never been initiated at all (103). Karen McCarthy Brown adds that Haitians often find comfort in their religion: “Vodou is the system that they have devised to deal with the suffering that is life, a system whose purpose is to minimize pain, avoid disaster, cushion loss, and strengthen survivors and survival instincts” (qtd. in Michel 28). It is possible that Juana does not acknowledge Vodou as a valid religion, or that she lacks understanding. She is devoted to the saints she prays to everyday and has faith in their judgement and power. It could be hard to grasp for her that in Haitian Vodou, there is a mutually dependent relation between the spirits and the devotees.
Haitian Vodou has no real notion of heaven. Claudine Michel asserts that “survival in this lifetime and healing for immediate well-being [therefore] become an ongoing process that engages Vodou adepts throughout their life and turns into the primary goal of their existence” (29). Even though there is no heaven, the spirits of the dead do continue to exist. The most important difference with the Catholic view of afterlife is that the Haitians do not consider the world of the spirits superior to their own. Immortality is not the ultimate goal, nor is it a reward for the sacrifices they have made in their present life (Brown 25). Dreams are seen as vehicles through which people can communicate with the spirits of the deceased, who usually appear to give advice and warnings (Brown 23). In addition, dreams can have a healing function (Brown 8). This is illustrated by the dream Amabelle has of her mother while staying in the hospital. Her mother never gave her much affection. As Amabelle lost her when she was still a child, she never learned to associate her serious face with anything other than a lack of love. In her dream, her mother’s ghost is smiling. She is reassuring her daughter that she has always loved her and that she always will (208). Amabelle elaborates on the importance of the dreams she has: “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” (265).

Amabelle uses her dreams to keep the memory of Sebastien alive. She is afraid that his spirit will vanish, just like his body has. She has conjured the few memories she has left of her parents so many times that they have almost faded to nothing. Now, all she can see are the last moments she spent with them: “The rest blended together like the ingredients in a too-long-simmered stew: reveries and dreams, wishes, fantasies. Is that what it would also come to with Sebastien?” (245). She literally admits that she keeps summoning her lover because she clings to the idea that he is still around: “He hadn’t disappeared; I wanted to be convinced of this, invoking his voice and face on many past occasions” (174). In Writing History, Writing Trauma, Dominick LaCapra asserts that “[o]ne’s bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound” (22). However, it can also be argued that Amabelle only feels the presence of ghosts because her religion dictates her to believe that the spirits of the people who have not been buried according to tradition will wander forever.
Dori Laub claims that traumatized victims need to testify before they can realize that their “lost ones are not coming back” and that “what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer” (74). Nevertheless, in Amabelle’s dreams, the lost ones are coming back; only they can ease her feeling of loneliness. Her dreams are as real to her as the outside world is. As she says herself, “it’s either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all” (2). In the first chapter, which is a chapter in bold, Amabelle notes that she has always been accompanied by shadows:

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Whenever I had playmates, they were never quite real or present for me. I considered them only replacements for my shadow. There were many shadows too in the life I had beyond childhood. At times, Sebastien Onius guarded me from the shadows. At other times he was one of them. (4)
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This passage not only foreshadows Sebastien’s death, it also suggests that Amabelle already longed for the company of ghosts and shadows long before she lost her parents and lover. Furthermore, she admits that she chooses to escape in her dreams whenever the present becomes unbearable: “I had been living inside dreams that would not go away, the memories of an orphaned child. When the present itself was truly frightful, I had perhaps purposely chosen not to see it” (143).

The past and the present often blend together in Amabelle’s narrative. They are both centred around ghosts, shadows and absent presences. When Amabelle is imagining the citadel of King Henry, she “could almost hear the king giving orders to tired ghosts who had to remind him that it was a different time – a different century – and that [they] had become a different people” (46). Right before this thought vanishes, Sebastien enters, and “Henry I’s murmurs became Sebastien’s” (46). Sebastien is still alive at this point in the story. He used to protect Amabelle from the shadows in her life until he himself became one (4). In the first chapter, Amabelle recounts an intimate scene between them. Sebastien is standing in a dark corner of her room where she cannot see him. He promises her that he will always be around: “It is good for you to learn and trust that I am near you even when you can’t place the balls of your eyes on me” (2). It turns out that his statement is doubly evocative. After they have made love, Sebastien leaves her room, but Amabelle continues to feel his presence on her skin (3). Likewise, she can still sense that he is near her even after he has passed away. Her body can feel his absence: “My back aches now in all the places he claimed for himself” (281).
Half of the fragments in bold relate intimate moments that Amabelle spent with her parents and with Sebastien. The other half, however, encompass nightmares in which she re-experiences how her parents drowned or in which Sebastien’s ghost is slipping away from her. She cannot always control which spirits visit her, and her dreams about the sugar woman or Odette are far from soothing. Amabelle struggles between the wish to be accompanied by spirits, and the need to forget her traumatic experiences and to move on. Her internal fight could reflect the tension between acting out and working through. However, it is doubtful whether these psychoanalytic concepts can be applied to Amabelle at all. Acting out and working through are notions that are developed in a Euro-American context, and as pointed out above, the Haitian society deals with death and suffering in a profoundly different way. Amabelle is deeply traumatized and revisits her traumas in her sleep, but at the same time, her religion helps her to find meaning and value in her nightmares. At the end of the novel, she has realized that she does not need to exorcise her ghosts; instead, she chooses to look to her dreams “for softness” (310).

In the exordium of *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida emphasizes the need to respect those who are “not there (...) those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living” (xix). He argues that the possibility of justice is tied up with the ability to commemorate the victims of injustice:

No justice (...) seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. (xix)

The wandering ghosts of the victims of the Haitian Massacre clamour for justice. Sebastien’s shadow is attached to every word and to every silence or lingering thought in Amabelle’s narrative. Moreover, the spectral presence of the sugar woman raises awareness for the victims of slavery as well. The phantoms that inhabit *The Farming of Bones* are always absent presences, they persist in half-life, and represent histories of untold violence and exclusion. By giving a voice and a face to the victims that are forgotten by history, the novel draws attention to the atrocities that were committed in the past, and that still haunt the present.
Chapter 5. The cultural potential of testimony

The third chapter has already touched upon the role of testimony in *The Farming of Bones*. This chapter therefore primarily focuses on the potential of oral testimony for justice and social change. Danticat’s novel will be compared to the Latin American *testimonio* genre, which gives a voice to oppressed people within a Latin American or Caribbean context. The elements of *testimonio* are: a first-person narrator, an insistence that the experience of the speaker represents a larger community and a plea for justice (Nance 3). The speaker raises awareness of a present critical situation and appeals the reader to undertake immediate action. As the *testimonio* scholar Kimberley Nance claims: “*testimonio* is not a matter of speaking of one’s suffering for therapeutic, archival, or judicial purposes, but (...) rather of speaking of one’s suffering in such a way that readers will be induced to act against the injustice of it” (90). John Beverley as well emphasizes the “moral and political urgency” (40) of *testimonio*, which “signifies the need for a general social change” (41).

According to Amy Novak, *The Farming of the Bones* can be regarded as a testimonial novel, a work of fiction that is mimicking *testimonio* (107). The testimonial novel is concerned with the same urge to tell the truth as *testimonio*, but within a fictional text. It can indeed be argued that Amabelle’s first-person account contains some of the features associated with *testimonio*. Nevertheless, Marta Caminero-Santangelo contests Novak’s assertion and insists that the novel is primarily a narrative of trauma, even though it does share characteristics with the testimonial novel (6). Both genres revise official history by telling a story from the vantage point of the marginalized other. Caminero-Santangelo points out that literary scholars have all too often linked the two genres without considering the differences between them (13). For instance, while *testimonio* and the testimonial novel take the authoritative narrative of the subaltern speaker as a starting point, trauma literature reflects the resistance to narration and the failure of understanding. The genre of *testimonio* has to gloss over the fact that the memories of the speaker are already distorted and that it is impossible to recount a fully objective testimony. Trauma literature on the other hand, does draw attention to the inability to testify accurately to a traumatic event. Another important distinction between *testimonio* and trauma literature is that *testimonio* above all arises from the desire to be heard, while trauma literature is marked by the need to tell (Caminero-Santangelo 13).
Novels such as *The Farming of Bones* that involve around a dictatorship that terminated decades ago can technically not qualify as *testimonio* literature. However, even though the Haitian Massacre is an event of the past, the racial dynamics that led to the slaughter still exist and the working and living conditions of the cane cutters have not improved. In the acknowledgements, Danticat gives her support to “those who still toil in the cane fields” (312). Since the novel draws attention to the present situation of the Haitian immigrants, it could indeed have a *testimonio* function (Caminero-Santangelo 21). In any case, it can be argued that *The Farming of Bones* fulfils what Sam Durrant sees as the principal task of postcolonial narratives: “to engender a consciousness of the unjust foundations of the present and to open up the possibility of a just future” (1).

The fact that the novel was initially meant for an American readership is significant as well. According to Gerise Herndon, Danticat attempts to “work against the historical amnesia so common in the US, the active forgetting of a shameful past” (7). In addition, the attitude of the Dominicans towards the Haitian immigrants in their midst mirrors the attitude of the anti-immigration activists in the United States with respect to the illegal immigrants that have crossed the US/Mexican border. However, Caminero-Santangelo points out that the *testimonio* function that is evoked by this comparison could be “incidental” (22).

Overall, Danticat’s novel seems to suggest that the potential of oral testimony for change or justice is limited (Novak 108). The testimonies of the nameless and faceless victims of the massacre are silenced because they impose a threat to Trujillo’s policy. It is also striking that the priests stop writing the testimonies of the survivors down. Initially, they wanted to occupy the role of external witnesses, but when the “terrible stories” of the victims started to affect their own reality, they decided to draw themselves back (254). According to Munro, the priests thereby emphasize the “otherness of the traumatized exiles” and confine their trauma “to the private sphere; the unspeakable” (89). April Shemak argues that the fact that Amabelle chooses not to tell her story after returning from the Dominican Republic further underscores the ambiguity of the novel concerning oral testimony (106). Amy Novak, on the other hand, asserts that Amabelle does testify by dedicating her story to Metrès Dlo. However, “while Amabelle may seek testimony as a means for working through the past, the silent address of this testimony asks the reader to rethink its larger cultural potential” (109). *Testimonio* is only effective when there is an audience that is listening and willing to react.
Chapter 6. The materiality of trauma

*The Farming of Bones* restores the material meaning of trauma, a concept that has become largely psychologised. It is not only Amabelle’s psyche that experiences trauma, her body does so as well. The latter is described as “a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament” that testifies to the atrocities that were committed during the massacre (226). In Haitian culture, the material body is considered to be one of the most important means of communication. The songs or the words that are recited in oral performances can only acquire meaning when they are “cadenced in the movement of the dance” (Michel 33). The body can thus be seen as an essential part of language. While the oral testimonies of the Haitian victims are dismissed as untrue in the wake of the massacre, their bodies offer visual evidence of what they have been through. The mutilated bodies of the Haitians are sites upon which memories are inscribed and can therefore be identified as *lieux de mémoire* (Lee 88). Amabelle states that their “past is more like flesh than air; [their] stories testimonials like the ones never heard by the justice of the peace or the Generalissimo himself” (281). The bodily testimonies of the Haitian victims challenge the way language and oral testimonies were manipulated by the governments on both sides of the island (Shemak 104).

It is important to take into account, though, that the body can be misinterpreted. During the massacre, the darker-skinned Dominicans were often slaughtered as well, since they were mistaken for Haitians. When Amabelle meets one of the Dominican victims in the hospital, she comments that “he’d been mistaken for one of us and had received a machete blow across the back of his neck for it” (217). Furthermore, the testimony that the fragile body presents can be easily destroyed. One of the other victims in the hospital recounts that his experience has made him realize that “it is no different, the flesh, than fruit or anything that rots. It’s not magic, not holy. It can shrink, burn, and like amber it can melt in fire. It is nothing. We are nothing” (213). Moreover, as April Shemak asserts, “the fact that survivors have to live with the brutal inscriptions of the regime for the rest of their lives lessens their own agency in telling their stories” (100). The bodies of the victims can only function as testimonies if they are interpreted that way by the people who “read” the bodies. When Amabelle reencounters Valencia more than twenty years after the slaughter, for instance, Valencia initially does not recognize Amabelle and thus fails to interpret the testimony that Amabelle’s body offers. It is as if she refuses to recognize that her country was responsible for altering Amabelle’s body (Shemak 104).
Amabelle’s father had warned her that “misery won’t touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of” (224). When Sebastien is still alive, his body is affected by his profound feelings of grief and anger. As Amabelle is holding him right after the death of his friend Joël, she notices that “it was more like touching the haze of anger rising off his skin, the tears of sadness he would not cry, the move san, the bad blood Joël’s death had stirred in him” (109). Derrida claims that mourning is inextricably tied up with the physical body: “Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization (…) This mimetic interiorization is not fictive; it is the origin of fiction, of apocryphal figuration. It takes place in a body” (qtd. in Herndon 8). He thereby departs from the Cartesian dualism of mind and body (Herndon 8). After the massacre, Amabelle’s entire body mourns Sebastien’s absence: “My back aches now in all those places that he claimed for himself, arches of bare skin that belonged to him, pockets where the flesh remains fragile, seared like unhealed bums where each fallen scab uncovers a deeper wound” (281). Unlike the memories she has of her parents, her memories of Sebastien are intensely real and physical. When Amabelle’s body has aged, she narrates that she “too felt and lived [her] own body’s sadness more and more every day” (276). Amabelle’s traumas have left their thumbprints on her body as well as in her body. In her case, trauma is not an entity that can be expelled. Novak asserts that the physicality of Amabelle’s trauma proves that there is a “need to rethink the very possibility of “working through” by demonstrating that the obstacle in comprehending the event is not simply a cognitive one” (102).

When Amabelle is being attacked in Dajabón, she can no longer mentally register pain towards the end of the assault, but still senses the “vibration of the blows” (194):

A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath. The pain was like a stab from a knife or an ice pick, but when I reached down I felt no blood. Rolling myself into a ball, I tried to get away from the worst of the kicking horde. I screamed, thinking I was going to die. My screams slowed them a bit. But after a while I had less and less strength with which to make a sound. My ears were ringing; I tried to cover my head with my hands. My whole body was numbing; I sensed the vibration of the blows, but no longer the pain. My mouth filled with blood. (194)

Novak observes that “the physical assault escapes articulation, registering in screams on the border between silence and speech” (103). The physicality of Amabelle’s trauma cannot be narrated, and cannot be fully understood. There is a period of latency between the actual event
and the experience of trauma because the body upon which the trauma is inscribed “evades the narrow limits of language and representation” (Novak 103). In the hours after the attack, Amabelle’s “chipped and cracked teeth kept snapping against the mush of open flesh inside [her] mouth. All the pain of first being struck came back to [her]” (197). Only after her body has re-experienced the traumatic event does her psyche revisit the event. She closes her eyes “and enter[s] a darkness of parsley” (197). Each move that Amabelle makes tortures her, and reminds her of everything she has lost. She becomes painstakingly aware that the assault has altered the way she used to stroll through life: “Every movement required a pause, a thought to what I was doing, where my legs were going as opposed to where they were supposed to go” (220).

When Amabelle has returned to Haiti, she realizes that she has lost the beauty and sexuality that had defined her before the massacre:

I could hear some of the courtyard children giggling as they peered at me through the holes in their doorways. In spite of their curiosity, I knew that my body could no longer be a tempting spectacle, nor would I ever be truly young or beautiful, if ever I had been. (227)

This realization changes the perception she has of herself, and she is even afraid that Sebastien would not recognize her if he came back (229). According to Sandra Soo-Jin Lee, memory “is inextricably linked to conceptions of separate selves” (88) and “the image of the ageing body becomes synonymous with deviance from the perfection of youth” (89). Soo-Jin Lee builds on Drew Leder’s model of the aged body as Other\(^1\) to claim that the ageing body can be constitutive of trauma (89). Now that Amabelle is older, she starts being haunted by the spectre of her younger self. The following passage further underscores Amabelle’s detachment from whom she used to be. The awareness that her body has altered threatens Amabelle’s conception of self:

The old and new sorrows were suddenly inconsolable, and I knew that the brief moments of joy would not last forever. When I saw a beautiful young man I tried to pair him up with my younger self. I dreamed of the life without pain that he might have brought me, the tidy parlor and spotless furnishings that our young children would not be allowed to touch, except to dust off on Saturdays. (276)

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\(^1\) “The body is no longer alien-as-forgotten, but precisely as-remembered, a sharp and searing presence threatening the self” (qtd. in Lee 89).
Charlotte Delbo has developed the concept of ‘deep memory’, in which past traumas are inscribed in the body and affect the senses. Deep memory comes to represent the endless present time of a traumatic event (Grunebaum and Henri 107). Grunebaum and Henri assert that “these representations of memory contest the very notion of the survival narrative in Western literary traditions, a conventionally heroic genre of narrative” (108). The life of the survivors is in reality often marked by struggle, despair and doom (108). Delbo’s concept of common memory, in contrast, can be considered as external memory; memory that can be recalled and that can be represented in a linear and chronological narrative (Grunebaum and Henri 109). Amabelle's narrative reflects the tension between common memory and deep memory. The main narrative represents common memory, while the disruptive, atemporal fragments in bold correspond to the concept of deep memory. Amabelle cannot reshape her traumatic past into a linear narrative that would make sense of her experiences. Her present life is scarred by the physical traces of past trauma. Amabelle’s testimony challenges the tendency of official history to silence narratives of physical trauma and to focus on the heroic tales of survivors.
Chapter 7. Engagement with otherness

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma theory can appeal people to rethink their engagement with otherness. As the first chapter has pointed out, though, Caruth tends to focus on the traumatic experiences of the dominant groups in society. It is therefore doubtful that her model of trauma theory “may lead to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound” (Caruth 8). Dominick LaCapra claims that empathy is crucial in attempting to understand the alterity of the other. He has coined the term “empathic unsettlement” to denote what he considers to be the desirable response to the traumatic experience of others:

Desirable empathy, involves not self-sufficient, projective of incorporative identification but empathic unsettlement in the face of the traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims (...) it involves virtual not vicarious experience - that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of - or speaking for - the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering. Instead affective involvement in, and response to, the other comes with respect for the otherness of the other. (135)

The first section of this chapter examines whether the characters of The Farming of Bones can recognize their own wounds in those of another while respecting the otherness of the other. Some of the key concepts of postcolonial studies, such as exile and in-betweenness, will be taken into account. The second part explains how the novel can be reread in terms of Marasa consciousness, a Vodou concept that encourages the transformation of binary oppositions.

7.1. Alliances formed through shared suffering

In “Unclaimed Experience”, Caruth asserts that “the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others (...) history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own” (18); “history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). Marta Caminero-Santangelo draws a parallel between Caruth’s words and Danticat’s intention to “implicate others” in her “re-imagined history” (17). In The Farming of Bones, there are indeed various examples of how the individual stories of the Haitians are implicated in one another. Amabelle re-imagines both her personal traumatic history and the collective trauma of the Haitians in her narrative. Moreover, characters that belong to different classes, races or nationalities are often implicated in each other’s traumas as well.
Critic Lynn Ink Chun claims that Danticat’s novel “gestures toward a collective identity formed through shared experiences” (790). It is true that pain and suffering seem to bind the characters together on various occasions. Señor Pico, Valencia’s husband, had ran over the cane worker Joël in his haste to return home to see his newborn babies. Since the Haitian immigrants are not granted a voice in society, not one of them could openly accuse Pico of murder. They mourn Joël’s death by collectively immersing in the Massacre River: “They shed their clothes and squeezed into the spaces left in the water. Void of ceremony, this was a silent farewell to Joël, a quiet wake at dawn” (63). The Haitians often reach out to one another when they seek comfort or consolation. Sebastien needs to hold on to Amabelle after his friend Joël has died: “His favorite way of forgetting something sad was to grab and hold on to somebody even sadder” (54). When Amabelle is travelling with Yves, Odette and the others, they can suddenly detect the smell of burning human flesh. The experience is utterly horrific, and they instinctively reach out to the person standing next to them: “Wilner rocked Odette’s body back and forth in his arms. I felt Tibon shiver and then realized I was holding his skeletal hand” (181).

April Shemak points out that Trujillo visualized the extent of his power on the bodies of the Haitians. The slaughter and the mutilation of bodies had an impact that was so overwhelming that it erased the individual identity of the victims; the shared pain and suffering turned them into a collective (Shemak 100). During the time that Amabelle spends in the hospital, she is unable to speak. In that instance, her voice shifts to the voices of the other victims: “greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell” (209). There is not one testimony that takes precedence. The fragmented stories are all woven together, and constitute one large collective testimony. When Amabelle witnesses the amputation of the leg of a young woman, she has a vicarious experience: “As I closed my eyes against her blood, thinking this would be the last time I would see someone dying, so sure was I that when the doctor said, ‘She’s not going to live,’ he was talking about me” (207). Another passage indicates as well that Amabelle is blending in with the other victims: “I looked for my face in the tin ceiling above me as I waited for Yves to return. With everyone lying face up and with their bodies so close together, I couldn’t tell which face was mine” (217). The identification of the victims with each other in this scene further suggests that trauma cannot be limited to the experience of the individual; it is also a collective phenomenon. Moreover, the presence of a multiplicity of voices in the hospital scene reflects one of the central concerns of
postcolonial literature: giving a platform to a group of people that has been oppressed or marginalized.

Even though the victims have collectively suffered through tragic loss, they often feel isolated in their grief as well. When Amabelle and the rest of the refugees meet along the way, they start exchanging their stories until they are too tired to converse: “Besides, each person’s story did nothing except bring you closer to your own pain” (177). When Man Denise has left Cap Haïtien, Amabelle wishes she could have done more to console Sebastien’s mother: “But some sorrows are simply too individual to share” (252). The most striking example of two characters that are unable to comfort each other are Amabelle and Yves. They were born in the same city, have led a comparable life and have experienced similar traumas, but they cannot lift each other’s pain. Perhaps Amabelle and Yves’ stories are too implicated in each other. As Amabelle says herself: “After I realized that Sebastien was not coming back, I wanted to find someone who would both help me forget him and mourn him with me. Perhaps this was too great a gift to ask of a man who was in search for the same thing for himself” (274). Amabelle and Yves are too traumatized and detached to help the other overcome his or her post-traumatic symptoms.

The Farming of Bones not only focuses on the bond between the Haitian characters, but also promotes solidarity between the Haitians and the Dominicans. At various points in the novel, characters from opposite social groups form alliances, especially after recognizing their own struggle in that of the other. However, these bonds are often threatened by racial or national differences (Ink 804). This is illustrated by the fragile kinship between Papi and Kongo. Papi was sitting in Pico’s car when Kongo’s son Joël was hit. Contrarily to Pico, Papi is consumed by guilt. A few days after the accident, he approaches Kongo to pay him his condolences. Papi wants to know the name of his son, so he can make a cross and put it on his grave, but Kongo objects: “no more crosses on my boy’s back” (144). This could be a reference to the crisscrossed trail of scars that most cane workers had on their back due to labour in the sugarcane fields. After their encounter, Papi disappears for a while to resurface later “with a cross on his back” (153). This cross could metaphorically represent the burden he is bearing. Papi could seek a way to soothe his feeling of guilt, if only a little. He had killed a lot of people during war and he believes that their ghosts are still walking besides him, “crushing his happiness” (145). He is convinced that they are responsible for the fact that his grandson Rafi was born on the day that Joël was killed only to die a few days later as well.
When Kongo recounts his meeting with Papi, Yves argues that “only killing would make things even” (144). However, Kongo knows that things are never even: “If it was so, his life and my life would be the same” (144). At the same time, he accepts Papi’s condolences and holds no grudge against him: “I feel perhaps I understood him a trace and he understood me” (145).

The next time a boundary is crossed is when Kongo offers his sympathy to Valencia for the loss of her son Rafi (Ink 805). When Valencia sees a group of cane workers near her house, she orders Amabelle to invite them to drink a cafecito (coffee) on her porch. Kongo and several of the other labourers accept the invitation. He ignores the conventions and walks straight into the room where Valencia is sitting with her remaining child. He reaches out to her because he wants to make clear that he understands how she feels. Valencia is afraid he will harm her daughter, so she shies away from him. Kongo then boldly grabs her hand, and kisses the tip of her fingers. In his best Spanish, he gives her his condolences, even though her husband was the man who killed his own son. For a brief moment, they join in mourning and they both forget the world of differences that is standing between them. However, immediately after he has left, Valencia feels regret for having allowed him to come near, and her husband smashes the tea set she had used to serve the cane workers to pieces (116). Racial prejudices and the boundaries of class prevent the establishment of a real kinship.

The relationship between Amabelle and Valencia also portrays the difficulties in breaking through the established order of society. The two women have the same age and both lost their mother when they were young. Because of the bond they share, Amabelle fails to recognize that they are not on the same side. The birth of Valencia’s twins mirrors the national tensions. Her son Rafi “was coconut-cream colored, his cheeks and forehead the blush pink of water lilies” while her daughter Rosalinda was “deep bronze, between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify” (9). Valencia immediately compares the colour of her daughter’s skin to Amabelle’s, and feels sorry for the girl: “My poor love, what if she’s mistaken for one of your people?” (12). Her strong reaction reveals the deep-rooted racial prejudices against Haitians. Amabelle does not object to Valencia’s racist comment, and thus unconsciously upholds the class distinctions (Shemak 89). After Rosalinda is baptised, Valencia informs Amabelle that her daughter is now a Christian instead of a Moor (119), as if the Catholic Church has the power to erase her daughter’s racial heritage. It is important to remember that Trujillo did not invent antihaitianismo. It had already been a fundamental part
of Dominican society for centuries. *The Farming of Bones* raises awareness of the complicity of the Dominicans in the massacre, and thereby corrects the way in which Rafael Trujillo is depicted in many of the literary works that were published after the Trujillo era. The demonization of Trujillo deflects attention away from the culpability of the rest of the Dominican population (Caminero-Santangelo 9).

When Sebastien scolds Amabelle for not taking the side of her fellow Haitians right away, she admits that “the Señora and her family are the closest to kin” she has (110). Amabelle does not know her extended family members in Haiti and no longer thinks of her former country as “home”. At the same time, she will never truly belong in her adopted country either. She is living in-between two cultures, an experience which may “be constitutive of trauma itself”, according to Bennett and Kennedy (7). In one of her dreams, Amabelle reflects that “a border is a veil not many people can wear” (264). Her sense of rootlessness shimmers through in the rest of the chapter: “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). Sebastien finds himself in a similar situation as Amabelle is. He lost his father when he was a child, and now has to make a living in the Dominican Republic. He believes that he and Amabelle are connected for this reason: “They say some people don’t belong anywhere and that’s us. I say we are a group of vwayajè, wayfarers. This is why you had to travel this far to meet me, because that is what we are” (56).

As the narrative is unfolding, it becomes more and more clear to Amabelle that she is regarded as the “other” by the Dominicans, and that she does not belong in the country she is currently living in. It is significant that Amabelle is almost hit by a stray bullet when Pico is teaching Valencia how to use a rifle (135). Even though Amabelle was raised by Valencia’s family, she will never be truly part of it. As a Haitian servant, she is disposable. However, it is only when Amabelle sees with her own eyes that the Haitians are endangered that she is capable of choosing the side of her countrymen. Right after she has found out that Sebastien has been taken captive, she witnesses how Pico is ordering his soldiers to load a group of Haitians in an army truck. When one of them falls and gets his knees crushed by the front wheel of the truck, Amabelle instinctively runs towards him. In doing so, she is colliding with the other Haitians (156). Ultimately, she has no other choice but to flee from Alegría and to return to Haiti.
Amabelle has often wondered what it would be like to go back to Haiti: “I had no papers to show, but it was probably recorded some place that the land was once my father’s and mother’s and – even though I hadn’t been there a long time – was still my birthright” (184). However, the reality of her homecoming differs drastically from her idealistic vision. She cannot recognize anything and she still does not feel as if she belongs. Gerise Herndon remarks that return involves “a recasting of identity, a double exile” (1). Because of Amabelle’s mutilated body, it is obvious that she is a victim of the massacre, and wherever she goes, people stare at her: “They recognized us without knowing us. We were those people” (220). Munro claims that “exiles find themselves nominally and physically in their ‘homeland,’ but psychologically they inhabit a completely different space, as Haiti is unable to accommodate their experience” (89). Upon returning, Amabelle realizes that she will have to cope with a sense of homelessness all of her life. The knowledge that her parents were not buried in Haiti and that she herself is childless could also contribute to her trauma of dislocation: “Land is something you care about when you have heirs. All my heirs would be like my ancestors: revenants, shadows, ghosts” (278).

More than twenty years after the massacre, Valencia and Amabelle meet again. When the two older women are standing face to face, Valencia fails to recognize Amabelle right away. The crushing impact that her initial rejection has on Amabelle recalls Fanon’s description of how the encounter with racial prejudice in a little white boy affected him: “what else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood” (112). Even after Valencia has apologized, Amabelle knows that it is too late for a joyful reunion. Only when she sees how different Valencia’s life has been from her own miserable life, does she fully understand the implications of her blackness. Valencia’s hands are “spotless, perfect and soft looking”, Amabelle’s hands are “cut and scarred with scissors and needle marks” (296). Amabelle realizes that she has always been the “other”, even though the two girls had appeared to be friends when they were younger.

Valencia explains Amabelle that she had hidden and helped many Haitians during El Corte: “I hid them because I couldn’t hide you, Amabelle. I thought you’d been killed, so everything I did, I did in your name” (299). At the same time, she keeps defending the actions of her husband, whom she has never forsaken: “Pico merely followed the orders he was given” (299). Her empathic reaction to the endangered Haitians can thus be seen as what LaCapra describes as “a self-sufficient psychological response that obviates or obscures the
need for sociopolitical understanding, critique and action” (134). Near the end of the novel, Valencia unconsciously reiterates the words that the Generalissimo had uttered in one of his speeches to justify the elimination of Haitians: “On the island, you walk too far and people speak a different language. Their own words reveal who belongs on what side” (304). The fact that Valencia mimics the national rhetoric makes it apparent that she will always belong to the Dominican side of the conflict.

When Amabelle says goodbye to Valencia, she recognizes the look on the face of Valencia’s new Haitian servant, since she once shared the sentiment:

I will bear anything, carry any load, suffer any shame, walk with eyes to the ground, if only for the very small chance that one day our fates might come somewhat closer and I would be granted for all my years of travail and duty an honestly gained life that in some extremely modest way would begin to resemble hers. (306)

Amabelle has lost her youthful trust and hope, but she has learned to embrace her otherness. The troubled relationship between the two women reveals that the boundaries between nation, class and race are all too often insurmountable.

7.2. Marasa consciousness

The birth of Señora Valencia’s twins is an event replete with symbolic meaning. When Rosalinda is born, there is a caul on her face and the umbilical cord is curled around her neck. Valencia is afraid that this means that her daughter will be cursed. In Haitian Vodou, however, children who are born with an umbilical cord around their neck are sacred (Houlberg 270). Ultimately, Rosalinda will survive, while her stronger and older twin brother will die only a few days after his birth. Twins are regarded as “powerful and dangerous” in Haitian Vodou, and “are associated with transitional spaces such as thresholds” (Houlberg 268). The Vodou sign that corresponds to the divine twins is the Marasa. Vèvè A. Clark claims that this sign symbolizes a cyclical relationship. The idea of “Marasa consciousness,” therefore, “invites us to imagine beyond the binary” (12). Marasa consciousness moves away from the binary oppositions that shape Western society, such as slave-master, white-black, either-or. Instead, it focuses on change and on the creation of new possibilities. Clark points out that interracial marriage, the mulatto phenomenon and the practice of indigenous religions such as Vodou have transformed the Caribbean society on several levels (13).
Nevertheless, numerous contradictions have persisted: “Bilingualism or diglossic dissonance in the Caribbean are at the very root of the problem requiring transformation” (Clark 14). The official language in postcolonial societies is often Other, since French, English and Spanish have largely replaced Creole and native languages. Despotic dictators such as Rafael Trujillo promote stagnation instead of movement and encourage the population to think in binary oppositions. During the Trujillo Regime, the language of the former colonizers entailed power and domination, while speaking Kreyòl equaled a death sentence (Herndon 5). The word perejil became the signifier of difference. In The Farming of Bones, the last word Odette utters before death is pèsi, which is Kreyòl for parsley. Amabelle reflects that if Trujillo had heard this, he might have been startled: “Not the tears and supplications he would have expected, no shriek from unbound fear, but a provocation, a challenge, a dare” (203). It was this challenge that Amabelle had silenced by sealing Odette’s mouth (Caminero-Santangelo 14). At this point in her life, Amabelle does not have the courage yet to fight the class structure that the Dominicans have imposed on the immigrants. She admits this in one of her nightmares: “I would go back with Odette to say her ‘pèsi’ to the Generalissimo, for I would not know how to say it myself. My way of saying it would always be – however badly – perejil” (264).

The majority of the survivors of the massacre desperately need a “civilian face to concede that what they had witnessed and lived through did truly happen” (236). Yves, on the other hand, does not trust the people that are taking the testimonies of the survivors: “You tell the story, and then it’s retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours” (246). According to Herndon, historiography is always suspect, since it is written in the language of the dominant groups in society: “Historiography and the language of the colonizer seem to erase or forgive the crimes of slavery and imperialism - or at least make them appealing” (5). In The Farming of Bones, Danticat re-imagines the history that is absent in official history. However, by questioning historiography, she is undermining her own position as a storyteller as well (Ink 799). She herself becomes the “civilian face” that writes the story of the victims down, in a language that is not theirs. Nevertheless, the text self-reflexively makes clear that there are always different versions of what is presented as “the truth”. When Valencia’s new servant wants to know why Trujillo chose the word perejil to test the Haitians, for instance, Valencia starts her story by saying that: “There are many stories. This is only one” (304). Amabelle comments afterwards that
there are indeed many stories, and she acknowledges that her own narrative as well “is only one” (305).

Sam Durrant claims that “the degree to which postcolonial writers are implicated in histories of racial oppression determines the nature of their literary witness and the ethicopolitical significance of their work of mourning” (14). It is therefore crucial to have an understanding of Edwidge Danticat’s own position as a writer. She was born in Port-au-Prince in the year 1969 and was raised during the dictatorship of François Duvalier. In an interview, she explains that trauma plays an important role in her novels because of her own traumatic childhood memories:

I think a lot of creative work springs out of some place deeper in us, a place that maybe even the writer does not have access to until he or she begins writing. I grew up under a dictatorship. Maybe that’s a bigger scar than even I realized when I was a child, or even now. Maybe I’ll understand it finally when I am an old woman. I saw a lot of people go away, a lot of people arrested, a lot of people “disappeared.” I thought when I was younger that I was “used to it.” It seemed like a sad, but kind of normal part of life. I thought it was like that everywhere, but maybe I was shell shocked by all this. Maybe I was traumatized and that trauma is now surfacing in this way. (qtd. in Munro 85)

At the age of twelve, Danticat moved to New York. The position of exile gave her the opportunity to re-examine her memories and to let them resurface in her creative work (Munro 85). Just like Amabelle, Danticat is in a state of in-betweenness. It is significant that Danticat uses the language of imperialism to write about her homeland, even though her mother tongue is Kreyòl. Danticat was aware of the implications of her choice for English: “I was purposely questioning myself and what I was doing – writing this story in English, stealing it, if you will, from true survivors who were not able or allowed to tell their stories” (qtd. in Novak 107). Herndon, however, argues that the position of the writer in exile can be interpreted in terms of Marasa consciousness as well: “the writer in exile goes beyond being either an insider or an outsider. The writer performs like the doubling Haitian twins” (4). Moreover, when a writer is able to code-switch, he or she can challenge the boundaries of language: “Writing about home in the Other’s language puts the exiled writer beyond national boundaries and thus enables the reader to understand the statelessness of diaspora” (Herndon 5). In addition, it can be argued that Marasa consciousness gives Danticat the opportunity to employ anti-narrative techniques without perpetuating the cultural hierarchy of Euro-American versus Indigenous literary forms.
April Shemak rereads *The Farming of Bones* in light of *Marasa* consciousness. The birth of Valencia’s twins can be analyzed as a metaphor for the “twin” nations of the island of Hispaniola. In this reading, the river that separates the two countries functions as the threshold. Valencia, the Dominican mother, gives birth to a lighter-skinned boy that metaphorically represents the Dominican Republic and a darker-skinned girl that metaphorically represents Haiti: “Seen through the lens of Marasa consciousness, Danticat’s text reworks the genealogy of the island by symbolically erasing the border between the nations and revealing their singular origin” (Shemak 92). The Dominican Republic is not a separate nation with a separate history. It has the same “mother”, and thus shares its origins with its “twin”, Haiti. Even though the darker-skinned Dominicans tend to deny their blackness and rather think of themselves as *indio*, they do have African heritage. According to Shemak, it is also significant that Amabelle is cast in the role of Valencia’s midwife. It could mean that she herself is capable of revealing the singular origin of the two nations (Shemak 93). In Haitian Vodou, the midwife or *sajfanm* helps the body of the mother in labour to cross borders (Shemak 92). It is therefore noteworthy that Doctor Javier offers Amabelle a job as a midwife at the border after he has taken notice of her skills. The fact that Amabelle declines his offer could signal that she is not ready yet to take up her responsibility. Shemak concludes that Amabelle may have accepted her role as a “midwife” at the end of the novel. Her presence at the border challenges the national ideology of Trujillo, the ruler who was willing to use machetes in order to dismember the island. By submerging herself in the river, Amabelle could attempt to embody the border between the two nations and to unify their shared history (Shemak 105).
Conclusion

This dissertation has demonstrated that the traditional model of trauma cannot be unproblematically translated to the specific context of *The Farming of Bones*. The full extent of Amabelle’s traumatized state can only be grasped when examined in relation to Haitian culture and Vodou. Nevertheless, the representation of trauma in the novel resembles some of the features associated with trauma theory. This field of studies has especially been valuable for examining how the narrative itself is affected by trauma. Amabelle’s traumatic memories resist narration and resurface endlessly in the chapters in bold. The novel insists on the unknowability of the traumatic past and makes it clear that closure and healing can never be fully attained. Danticat employs anti-narrative techniques to convey a failure to represent trauma and to question the official discourse of society. As the traumatic experiences of the protagonist cannot be accommodated by the dominant classes, they are registered in the eloquent silences and gaps of her voiceless testimony. Danticat’s position as a Haitian-American writer enables her to challenge the boundaries of literary traditions.

The analysis of *The Farming of Bones* has affirmed that when the field of trauma studies engages with postcolonial studies, it can provide a framework that is suitable for examining the traumas of the Haitian immigrants. Danticat’s novel addresses numerous issues that are central to postcolonial studies, such as exile, dislocation, cultural difference and otherness. She gives a name and a face to individuals that have been marginalized and raises awareness of the factors that have determined their condition. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out, Danticat eschews some of the tendencies of other postcolonial writers as well. While she depicts the struggle of the oppressed to gain agency, her characters do not come into voice. The fragmented structure of the novel does not celebrate the multiple aspects of Caribbean identity, but draws attention to the significance of silence. Moreover, rather than relegating traumatic events to the past, the narrative text shows that the present cannot be fully liberated from the past. Haiti is a deeply traumatized country. It has suffered through countless human tragedies, despotic dictators, natural disasters and diseases that have long been eliminated in the rest of the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, tragedies such as the massacre of 1937 cannot be regarded as singular and disruptive events in the history of the
nation. The traditional definition of trauma needs to be altered in order to examine its effect on a country where trauma is a part of life.

It has been tempting to read psychoanalytic terms such as acting out and working through into *The Farming of Bones*. However, it has become clear that these concepts are not completely suitable to explain the symptomatic behaviour of the traumatized characters. Haitian culture has a tremendous impact on the way they experience trauma. In general, it can be said that Haitians demonstrate a different attitude towards trauma than people in most Western societies do. They regard suffering as an inevitable aspect of life that therefore needs to be accepted. While Yves’ work enables him to lose himself in the present, if only for brief moments, Amabelle has more difficulties with integrating her suffering into her life. She occupies her days with performing a dull routine so she could just float along, without having to experience life any further. She confesses that she has chosen to live in a detached state because she does not have the courage to move on, unlike what society expects her to do. She cannot confront herself with her past nor her present. Her narrative challenges Western literary traditions that focus on the heroic side of survival and that omit struggle, despair and chronic physical pain. It can therefore be concluded that the representation of trauma in *The Farming of Bones* not only reflects the concerns of Haitian society, but also offers a response to the Western narrative tradition.

When Amabelle’s nightmares are analyzed in light of Haitian Vodou, it can be observed that the notion of acting out is inadequate to explain why she revisits her traumas in her sleep. The belief system of Haitian Vodou helps the protagonist to find meaning in her traumatic experiences and thus affects the way in which her dreams and nightmares can be interpreted. Her dreams offer her a platform to communicate with the dead. The insights gained from examining the sanctity of burial in Haiti elucidate why Amabelle is being haunted by the spectres of the people that were not entombed. The main goal of her silent testimony, though, is not to bury the dead but to grant them the eternal life that history has denied them. She embraces the company of phantoms and is not looking to exorcise them.

The role of testimony in the novel further suggests that not all the concepts developed by traditional trauma theory are universal. Amabelle is capable of narrating her story to the people closest to her, but that does not facilitate a process of mourning or healing. The physicality of her trauma prohibits her from working through and from putting the past behind
her. The traumatic events that are haunting her cannot be externalized regarding that they are inscribed on her body as well as in her body. Moreover, since amnesia is politically coerced, it is impossible for the marginalized victims to gain agency. The dominant classes in society select which traumatic events can be commemorated by official history. If there is nobody who is willing to listen to the testimonies of the trauma survivors and to acknowledge the reality of their experience, then it is made impossible for them to repossess their life story through the act of testifying. Nevertheless, while the oral testimonies of the victims are easily dismissible, their mutilated bodies offer a silent accusation that cannot be denied. Similarly, Amabelle’s testimony may never be heard by the authorities, neither can she truly be silenced. Her voice is sealed inside of her head and continues to clamour for justice, together with the ghosts of the victims.

The refusal of the governments on both sides of the island to provide justice to the victims of the massacre has inflicted damage on the collective identity of the Haitians. However, even though the Haitians have been ignored, silenced and oppressed, they can rely on the cultural strategies they have developed to overcome their traumas. The collective Vodou ceremonies, for instance, help the entire population to find the strength to survive. The references to dance, music and storytelling in *The Farming of Bones* draw attention to the role of performance in the commemoration and mourning of past tragedies. The scene in the hospital in which the victims are joined in lamenting further indicates that individual grief can be transformed into a collective experience. At this instance, it becomes clear that Amabelle’s narrative is inhabited by the voices of the other victims of the slaughter as well. While Amabelle is trapped in the liminal space between past and present, the other survivors immediately focus on the life that lies ahead of them. It is striking that when Amabelle conjures the victims up in another passage, she imagines that they have all been able to move forward in life. It seems as if she is reflecting on the singularity of her own experience by comparing it against the collective experience of the Haitians. Although the massacre can be regarded as a collective trauma, it is important to remember that each individual interprets traumatic events in his or her own way. It is not only Amabelle’s cultural framework that determines the way she deals with present tragedies, but also her personal history. She has lost her lover, her family, her home, her identity and her able-bodiness. Each new loss she suffers makes it harder for her to move on and to forget. Her narrative reflects the tensions
between the individual and the collective spheres, which is one of the main concerns of postcolonial texts.

Even though *The Farming of Bones* focuses on the traumas that Haiti and its inhabitants have suffered, it also represents a more subtle portrait of Haitian society. Danticat’s novel makes its readers familiar with the human side of disaster. In the rest of the world, Haiti is above all known for the traumas it has suffered. Nobody acts shocked when the country is ravaged by an earthquake or when there is an outbreak of cholera. Danticat moves beyond the surface of stereotypes and illuminates the effect of trauma on the lives of the people that have to cope with living in an atmosphere of constant threat. She portrays the courage and the complexity of a society that has learned to fight and to scramble back to its feet after every tragedy that has struck. Furthermore, the writer attempts to promote solidarity between the two nations of the island by exposing their shared history. Her novel appeals to the Dominicans and the Haitians to stop focusing on their differences and to start recognizing themselves in one another. Danticat also draws attention to the ongoing trauma of racial oppression. The troubled interaction between the two communities reveals that the racist dynamics of the island prevent friendships from establishing and desirable empathy from manifesting itself. The Dominicans have yet to take up their responsibility for the massacre. They need to become aware of the ghostly presences that are still roaming the island, craving for justice. It can be argued that the abominable conditions in which the Haitians are living will never improve as long as the traumas of the past are not reckoned with.
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