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**At the Crossroads:
Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*
by Heather Hewett**

In October of 1937, Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered his troops to massacre as many as 15,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic.¹ The attack came as a complete surprise to these Haitians, as well as to many Dominicans; no prior event had warned them of what was about to take place. The killings were swift and particularly brutal.² Trujillo ordered his soldiers to use machetes and other crude weapons instead of guns, a brutality captured by the name of the massacre: in Spanish, *El Corte*, the cutting, and in Haitian Krèyol, *kout kouto*, the stabbing.³ Those who survived lived with permanent injuries, scars, and impairments as well as the psychological trauma of having experienced a massacre.

After visiting Haiti in order to research the testimonies of survivors, Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat wrote *The Farming of Bones* (1998), a historical novel that tells the story of one individual's experience of the attack and its devastating effects (Danticat, "Reading"). Her novel is filled with wounded and disabled individuals whose marked, scarred bodies prevent them and those around them from forgetting what has happened. For disability studies scholars, it presents a complex perspective on the meanings of disability and the relationship of disability to trauma; yet to date, no literary scholars have explored the relevance of interpretive frameworks provided by disability studies. Instead, critics have discussed the novel's central issues – memory, testimony, nationalism, displacement, language, and corporeality – using a critical vocabulary drawn from other disciplines, including Caribbean and Latin American studies, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, Holocaust studies, and trauma theory. The result has been a rich and rewarding body of criticism on the novel, but one that lacks any mention of disability.

In the spirit of rereading espoused by Michael Bérubé, I propose reconsidering Danticat's novel with a closer attention to disability (Bérubé 576). In order to do this, we need a critical vocabulary that incorporates concepts from disability studies into existing discussions about testimony, memory, and trauma in *The Farming of Bones*. Such a vocabulary, however, remains elusive. As James Berger argues, a "discursive abyss" separating disability studies from trauma studies has resulted in two separate and disconnected theoretical discussions about frequently overlapping phenomena (563). Within disability studies, this discursive abyss manifests itself in the absence of a sustained inquiry into trauma and loss. Berger suggests that the political origins of disability studies – namely, its links with the disability rights movement in the US., its critique of oppressive discourses that have constructed the absolute alterity of those who live with disabilities, and its concern with "achieving equal access to full social, professional, and political lives" for disabled individuals – have taken precedence over an

exploration of the “particularities of loss” of any one individual (572). Indeed, these political goals have resulted in a reluctance to admit that disability is at times accompanied by feelings of loss, fear, or mourning (572). Berger finds this omission somewhat “remarkable” (571):

Not all instances of disability are traumatic, certainly not in a direct way. But many are, such as those produced by war, accident, and sudden debilitating illness, both for the individuals affected and for their families. [...] Disability, particularly when experienced after infancy or childhood, involves loss, and loss entails mourning. A theory of disability might well try to include a theory of loss specific to disability – that is, the loss of physical, mental, and neurological capacities. The world itself, and one’s own body, must be relearned, processes clearly analogous to some of the central concerns of trauma studies. One would think that a theory of disability would address such questions of trauma, loss, mourning, and regeneration that seem so closely associated with many people’s experiences of disability. (572)

It is at this theoretical crossroads of disability studies and trauma studies that I locate my examination of Danticat’s novel. Rereading *The Farming of Bones* with an integrated notion of disability and trauma helps to explain the powerful “sympathetic response” among many of its readers (Fulani 77); for while massacre is most likely not familiar to much of the novel’s North American audience, the experiences of loss and disability most likely are. At the same time, however, our theory of disability needs to be grounded in Caribbean history and culture in order to fully account for the experiences of Danticat’s Haitian characters and the author’s invocation of Haitian literary and cultural narratives of disability. Drawing from notions of disability grounded in AfroCaribbean myth and ritual, *The Farming of Bones* explores the symbolic crossroads that mark all transitional journeys in the African diasporic world – a crossroads that, I suggest, points to new directions for disability studies scholarship.

The Language of Disability

As I have argued elsewhere, *The Farming of Bones* explores the impact of nationalism, race, and gender on the bodies of men and women (Hewett 329-33). The novel is full of descriptions of the bodily marks and disfigurements of its characters. On the very first page, the narrator, Amabelle Désir, gives us a description of her lover, Sebastien, whose face has been “ripped apart” by the cane, “leaving him with crisscrossed trails of furrowed scars” (1). The “map of scars” on the back of old man Kongo gives us a powerful visual symbol with roots in the nineteenth-century slave trade, when the scarred back became one of the most potent and recognizable corporeal signifiers of the violence within the institution of slavery (62).⁴ In *The Farming of Bones*, this image provides a diasporic historical context for the Foucauldian power of the Dominican nation-state. Furthermore, as April Shemak argues, Haitian bodies are first “marked by sugarcane” and later “alter[ed]... by the machete,” suggesting that the massacre presents a “culmination” of work in the cane fields (98). Shemak understands Haitian bodies as “sites of memory” (85): they are the “material reminders, historical markers in a sense, of Trujillo’s attempt to obliterate them” (88). Thus they become an alternative to verbal witnessing, a kind of “corporeal ‘text’” (99).

Shemak’s argument contextualizes Danticat’s novel and her fictional narrator-witness in the Latin American literary tradition of *testimonio*, or testimony.⁵ As Renée Larrier

observes, the literary tradition of *témoignage* and the figure of the witness also recur in Francophone Caribbean fiction by women (51); and in fact, a parallel tradition occurs in Holocaust literature and other literatures of trauma. Situating *The Farming of Bones* within a framework of testimony raises such central questions as the possibility of representation in the aftermath of trauma and the relationship of individual memory to collective history. However, as Berger suggests, the resulting critical vocabulary tends not to describe the effects of trauma with words such as “disability,” even when survivors have lost their physical and/or cognitive abilities (569).

In making the case for reading *The Farming of Bones* within a disability studies framework, I am aware of the imprecision of language, of the field’s worthy but incomplete attempt to forge a discourse that adequately represents both the complexity and diversity of physical, cognitive, and emotional experience. Even words such as “impairment” and “disability,” words generally used to distinguish between a “medical model that focuses on the physically impaired individual” and a “social model that focuses on ‘the nature of society which disables physically impaired people,’” have had their critics (Swan 293). Nonetheless, the language of disability introduces an important lens for examining the effects of violent events such as a massacre. It furthermore enables us to have a slightly different discussion about the novel, one that invites us to consider how the role of able-bodiedness and disability may have affected the daily lives of the massacre’s survivors.

In *The Farming of Bones*, the term “disability” provides an accurate and general category for the condition of many Haitians both before and after the massacre. As a result of working in the cane fields, as Danticat’s narrator tells us, many Haitian workers became permanently impaired. For example, older female workers – those who are “ancient enough to be our great-grandmothers,” as Amabelle comments – have lost their able-bodiedness as a result of their work (61):

Among the oldest women, one was missing an ear. Two had lost fingers. One had her right cheekbone cracked in half, the result of a run-away machete in the fields.

The oldest cane-cutting women were now too sick, too weak, or too crippled to either cook or clean in a big house, work the harvest in the cane fields, or return to their old homes in Haiti. So they started off every morning bathing in the stream, and then spent the rest of the day digging for wild roots or waiting on the kindness of their good neighbors. (61)

No longer able to work, the old women are forced to forage or beg for their food. Rendered disabled, they are of no use to their former employers. In fact, everywhere Amabelle looks, before the massacre, she sees wounded and impaired Haitians, “clusters of anxious faces peering out from everywhere in the garden, people who looked tired and ill, some with bandages on their shoulders and pieces of clothing acting as slings to hold up their arms” (72).

In other words, the social position of Haitians at the bottom of society (or, as one of the characters puts it, as the “burnt crud at the bottom of the pot”) places them at great risk of becoming disabled and impaired (56). They are physically vulnerable, both individually and collectively. *The Farming of Bones* furthermore invites us to draw comparisons between the cane fields and the 1937 massacre. The title, “the farming of bones,” connects both through its double meaning: it refers to the punishing work of the cane life, “travay tè pou zo,” which involves harvesting the bone-like stalks (55); and it is

also a reference to El Corte, when there were “so many human beings cut down like mere stalks of sugarcane at harvest time” (Wucker 49).⁶ As Shemak puts it, the massacre is “a kind of cultivation of death where the machete, the canecutter’s tool, becomes the *modus operandi* of the massacre” (85). And while the purpose of the massacre was to kill Haitians, not disable them, *The Farming of Bones* suggests that this was one of its consequences.

We see this most vividly in Amabelle’s experience. Her suffering includes physical as well as emotional pain, and the daily experience of living in a changed body is in many ways what makes her unable to forget the past. Thus her inner struggle to accept her permanently altered body constitutes an important part of her larger journey to accept loss and loneliness, and it is this journey that generates the central dramatic conflict of the novel. Focusing on Amabelle’s experience of her body enables us to better understand the ways in which her inner transformation is tied to her physical one.

Identity and the Body

Amabelle’s position as a traumatized and wounded survivor provides the novel with much of its emotional and dramatic power. Her experience epitomizes the homeless and stateless condition of the many diasporic Haitians whom Sebastien describes as “an orphaned people” and “a group of vwayajè, wayfarers” (56). Amabelle is literally an orphan, marked by the loss of her family at a young age: born in Haiti, she loses both parents while they are crossing the Massacre River, the boundary separating the two nations on Hispaniola; and for most of her young adult life, she has lived in the fictional Dominican town of Alegría, where she works as a maid for a landowning Dominican family. The ongoing trauma of her parents’ drowning manifests itself in recurring dreams as well as Amabelle’s affinity for water – rivers, waterfalls, and lakes – which can be understood not just as a symptomatic repetition of loss but also her own desire for a place of safety. This is suggested by the novel’s dedication, which Danticat places in the words of Amabelle: “In confidence to you, Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers.” As Larrier points out, “Mèt Dlo is a Vodun figure from whom one seeks protection and it is to his female counterpart that Amabelle dedicates her narrative” (54). In the novel, the “sanctuary” of the waterfall takes on additional significance in Amabelle’s memory as the protective barrier that hides the cave where she and Sebastien meet (Larrier 55). This meeting place provides a paradisiacal, church-like refuge with its “luminous green fresco” of papaya leaves and “marble”-like surface where they are free to make love (100).

Amabelle’s memories of their time together are sensual and erotic. Set apart by bolded typeface, the short and impressionistic chapters that recount these highly charged moments are told in a lyrical “voice of dreams,” as the author has explained them (Danticat, “Reading”). Amabelle narrates these events in the present tense, signaling an entry into the timelessness of memory and physical intimacy. She constantly describes the great power held within her body, to which she surrenders herself and from which she learns to “celebrate” herself (100). From the “emptiness” in her “bones” and the “breath” in her “blood,” she learns how to trust her body, which “knows better” than herself (100). Amabelle’s invocation of a deep bodily knowledge resonates with Audre Lorde’s articulation of the power of the erotic, which Lorde defines as a “source of power and information within [women’s] lives” (53). In these memories, Amabelle replays the

power of Sebastien's body next to hers; she can still smell his sweat, feel his presence, his lips, her cheeks under his fingers, his tongue on her back, his hands around her wrists (3).

In these chapters, we also learn about the power Amabelle's body holds over Sebastien. In the very first scene of the novel, for example, Amabelle remembers a conversation between them:

"Look at your perfect little face," he says, "your perfect little shape, your perfect little body, a woman child with deep black skin, all the shades of black in you, what we see and what we don't see, the good and the bad."

He touches me like one brush of a single feather, perhaps fearing, too, that I might vanish.

"Everything in your face is as it should be," he says, "your nose where it should be."

"Oh, wi, it would have been sad," I say, "if my nose had been placed at the bottom of my feet."

This time he is the one who laughs. (3)

Through Sebastien's eyes, we see Amabelle's beauty, which is defined as perfection and able-bodiedness: her shape is "perfect" and "little," her color "deep," her nose precisely where it "should be." "Deformity" is something that she and Sebastien laugh about, an abnormality that has no place on her perfect body. Sebastien's view of his "woman child" lover suggests how gender is intertwined with able-bodiedness and youth: to be feminine is as much defined by the presence of certain traits (youth, innocence, beauty) as it is by the absence of others (markings, deformities, disability).

If Amabelle's vulnerability as a "woman child" intensifies the fear (both Sebastien's as well as the reader's) that she is threatened by the possibility of bodily harm, the novel's structure heightens this fear. The chapters containing Amabelle's erotic memories are juxtaposed with chapters recounting the main events of the plot. These chapters, narrating the events leading up to and following the massacre, are told in a "voice of straight narrative" (Danticat, "Reading"). By accentuating the contrast between the violence of history and the intimacy of love, the narrative mimics the abrupt and searing pain of loss. Amabelle loses everything but her life: not only Sebastien but also her youth, her beauty, and her body as she had known it, a body that had enabled her to experience intense pleasure and ecstasy.

While the novel's dramatic tension builds as a result of the inexorable steps leading up to the massacre and Amabelle's confrontation with a Dominican mob in the border town of Dajabón, where she is attacked and beaten, its central conflict emerges in Amabelle's interior struggle to accept the effects of the massacre. In this she is not alone. After escaping across the Massacre River to a border clinic, she finds herself surrounded by other Haitian refugees who have also lost loved ones and now suffer from injuries and wounds: amputations, machete gashes, and rope burns. Compared to those around her, she "does not look bad as some" (206). But while her wounds may not be visible, they are real: her knees and jaw are badly injured, and she cannot talk. And while she eventually regains her ability to speak, she is permanently changed. Her knee does not always bend, the insides of her ears buzz, and her jaw is misaligned. The "marred testament" of her body provides a continual reminder to her of all that she has lost (227).

In the years that follow, Amabelle struggles to live in her new body. Initially unable to eat solid foods, she is spoon-fed by Yves' mother, "as though I were a sick, bedridden child" (225). In her reversion to a childlike state, she simultaneously finds herself bereft

of the sexuality and beauty that had previously defined her identity. For example, when she bathes herself with a “bitter orange” that she hopes will “heal” her “cuts” and “bone aching,” she realizes that others perceive her differently (221):

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. Now my flesh was simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament. (227)

No longer a “tempting spectacle” with sexual appeal, she finds herself categorized as an oddity by others. She has lost her youth and now, aged and scarred, her flesh is a “map of scars and bruises,” much like the “map of scars” on Kongo’s back (62). Her misaligned jaws make her look like a “feeding mule” when she smiles, and her knee cannot bend “without pain” (229). Worst of all, she worries that Sebastien “would not recognize me if he ever saw me again” (229). Because of her physical scars and impairments, she is no longer a “perfect” woman: disability not only prevents others from seeing her as beautiful and sexual, but it also changes her own view of herself. In this shift of perception we see the ways in which constructions of gender and sexuality depend upon able-bodiedness and youth, and the reluctance, as many disability studies scholars have pointed out, for others to view disabled women as sexual beings (Asch and Fine).

Yet her memory refuses to let her forget what she used to feel like with Sebastien. Loss is intensely physical for Amabelle; her body remembers the presence of Sebastien with acute pain:

His name is Sebastien Onius. Sometimes this is all I know. 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 burns where each fallen scab uncovers a deeper wound. (281)

Her flesh feels raw and fragile, and her emotional wounds are so deep that they manifest themselves in physical sensations such as “unhealed burns” and “fallen scab[s].” Amabelle’s memory of being with Sebastien is so real, so physical, that she comments that her “past is more like flesh than air” (281). Her body still feels the events of the past, and her memory of being with Sebastien is so real that she compares it to flesh.

As a result, Amabelle lives like a “ghost,” trapped somewhere between past and present (243). She cannot escape her memories to live more fully in the present moment; even the act of having sexual intercourse – what had, in her former life with Sebastien, made her feel completely alive – only leaves her with “an even larger void in the aching pit of my stomach” (250). She is haunted by her younger self, by the life she might have had but never will:

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)

She mourns not only Sebastien but also the possibility of having children, of “wasting” her reproductive capabilities. Her injured body comes to stand for lost possibility, and she experiences physical pain as synonymous with emotional pain, “feel[ing] and liv[ing] my own body’s sadness more and more every day” (276). With the passing of time, she feels herself “growing old,” her “wider, heavier body slowly fold[ing] towards my feet, as though my bones were being deliberately pulled from their height towards the ground” (267).

Amabelle’s experience of her ailing, aging body provides an important window onto what is, at its core, an existential dilemma: in the wake of unbearable pain and lost possibility, she must find reason to live. She seeks relief for her suffering in several ways: through remembering her mother’s love (208), through attempting to give official testimony to Haitian functionaries (231-6); through seeking out Sebastien’s mother (238-43); through finding others who knew Sebastien (256); through immersing herself in the work of sewing (274). Her deepest desire, of course, is to preserve Sebastien’s memory and the memory of her relationship with him. Amabelle’s voicing of her bodily experience thus reveals an essential ingredient of her *testimonio*, however insufficient language may ultimately be.⁷

Although fictional, *The Farming of Bones* suggests an intriguing parallel between narratives of trauma and what G. Thomas Couser calls “autopathography,” or autobiographical narratives about illness and disability (5). Both frequently share a narrator’s attempt to articulate bodily changes – often painful or unwanted – that lie outside of his or her control. The resulting reflection about the relationship between self-identity and the body, while painful, can lead to a “heighten[ed] consciousness of self and of contingency” (Couser 5). In *The Farming of Bones*, two such moments of amplified self-awareness warrant further examination: the beginning of the narrator’s journey to Haiti, and the end of her return trip to the Dominican Republic. As transitional moments, moments imbued with both danger and possibility, they feature the appearance of solitary figures who mirror Amabelle’s experience and help her on her journey. Both disabled, one physically and the other mentally, these two characters call to mind another figure, Esu-Elegba, the West African trickster and guardian of the crossroads, whose multiple incarnations include Papa Legba in Haiti. Danticat’s invocations of Papa Legba introduce a spiritually resonant myth that carries with it a long history of contemplation about the transitional and transient nature of bodily ability and disability.

Reimagining Esu: Disability in AfroCaribbean Cosmologies

Before examining Danticat’s use of crossroads figures in *The Farming of Bones*, I want to step back and make a larger argument: that we should reread Esu-Elegba as disabled. I make this claim with some caution; after all, Esu is a trickster figure, and he requires all those who engage in the slippery act of interpretation to be careful. Nonetheless, rereading Esu as disabled forefronts the centrality of the body and the body’s experiences – illness, disability, impairment, aging, and death – within a larger African diasporic understanding of contingency and mortality. Above all, this reimagining is meant to be suggestive, one that expands rather than limits the many meanings of Esu.

Esu-Elegba endures as a central figure within African diasporic letters, and it would be difficult if not impossible to do justice to the extensive body of scholarship and literary

reflection on the multiple dimensions of Esu. Most recently, scholars such as Edward Pavlić have forged alternative understandings of Esu's centrality within African American literature to those articulated by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*. In my exploration of AfroCaribbean figurations of disability, I draw from Pavlić's expanded understanding of the crossroads as a symbolic place that encompasses internal and creative journeys as well as physical ones (66). However, my rereading of Esu departs from that of most previous scholars, who have not understood either Esu-Elegba or Papa Legba as disabled. Instead, Esu's crippled condition is usually understood within a metaphorical context. Gates, for example, explains that Esu's limp is caused by the varying lengths of his legs: "his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world" (6). Esu's disability, in other words, gives him his power: his ability to see beyond the everyday world. It thus enables him to perform as a mediator, carrying messages back and forth between the human and divine worlds; and for Gates, this capacity highlights Esu's importance as an indigenous African trope for the act of literary interpretation, an act riddled by uncertainty and defined by the ambiguities of figurative language (21).

Following the lead of other disability studies scholars who have examined the relationship between disability and supernatural ability, we might consider Esu as a kind of divine figure not unlike Jesus Christ, who Nancy Eiesland reinterprets as a "disabled god," or perhaps even akin to some North American comic book superheroes or supervillains. (As Bérubé observes of the mutant characters in the *X-Men* films, their "exceptionality" is fundamentally "link[ed]" to their disability (569).) I suspect, however, that we can see in Esu a slightly more nuanced understanding of disability; after all, he is a figure whose very existence highlights and embodies contradiction. As a trickster and a mediator, Esu is neither all good nor all bad: he might carry your message to the spirits, but then again, he might not. We can understand this ambiguity as an example of a "both/and" epistemology, one that may provide an alternative to the binary of ability and disability. In his diverse assortment of attributes, we can perhaps discern a complex understanding of the shifting nature of physicality, one that challenges simplified concepts of "disabled" and "abled" identity.

Historically, Esu embarked on a transformative journey from Nigeria to Haiti, and we need to examine his New World counterpart in order to understand Danticat's invocation of crossroads figures in *The Farming of Bones*. Papa Legba, one of the central figures in the Haitian vodou pantheon of spirits, has more pronounced disabilities in comparison to his Nigerian predecessor. Whereas Esu is usually depicted as a young and virile character who has no deficiency of sexual desire (a desire which is bisexual, as he encompasses both male and female traits), Papa Legba has aged into an old man who is much worse for the wear: his limp has worsened, he has aged considerably, and he has become much weaker.⁸ Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describe "Legba-pied-cassé or Legba of the Broken Foot" as "a feeble old man leaning on a crutch, dressed in rags with a pipe in his mouth and a knapsack slung over his shoulder" (110). Likewise, Donald Cosentino describes him as often depicted as St. Lazarus; he is frequently "dressed in rags" and "covered with sores" (266). This image heightens the incongruity between Legba's appearance and his power, for his "apparent fragility conceals terrific strength, which is displayed during possession" (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 111).

Some, like the writer Maya Deren, have wondered whether it was the experience of the Middle Passage that aged Esu so dramatically: “It is as if in coming westwards, the Africans had left behind the morning and noon of their destiny, the promise and power of their own history” (Deren qtd. in Consentino 266). Regardless, it is clear that Legba is often depicted as a survivor who hovers on the threshold between life and death. This pairing of strength with disability occurs elsewhere in Haitian folklore, which contains other examples of disabled heroes such as Mackandal.⁹ One of the “fathers” of Haiti, Mackandal was an ex-slave and vodou priest who led a failed rebellion against French plantation owners in 1757 and became one-armed as the result of a farm accident.¹⁰ As with Legba, Mackandal’s disability is tied to his power. Cuban author Alejo Carpentier describes this connection in his novel *The Kingdom of This World* (1949). After his accident, Carpentier writes, Mackandal was “incapacitated for heavier work” and subsequently “put in charge of pasturing the cattle,” where he began to learn about herbs (23). This experience enables Mackandal to develop a deep knowledge about poison and other magical arts, such as shapeshifting, which he subsequently uses to galvanize slaves to fight the French.

Mackandal’s transformation suggests a recurring Haitian narrative about disability: that reciprocity exists between humans and spirit. As Joseph Murphy writes in *Working the Spirit*, his study of religious traditions throughout the African diaspora, individuals who are touched by the spirit undergo some kind of “disturbance” in their lives, such as a serious illness, which causes their old self to die and a new self to be reborn; with this new identity comes a new “vision,” the “ability to ‘see’ simultaneously the spiritual and human worlds” (191). There is a kind of exchange, if you will, of able-bodiedness for second sight.

These cultural narratives and myths provide an important context for reading Danticat’s novel. As with her other work, most notably *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1995), vodou manifests itself as one of several “cultural markers” that are “associated with Haitian Afrocentricity” (Chancy 126). In *The Farming of Bones*, vodou leaves its traces in several places, most notably in the birth of Señora’s Valencia’s twins, which are known in vodou as *marassa*.¹¹ In addition, special circumstances surrounding the twins’ birth, particularly the presence of a caul and umbilical cord woven around the girl’s neck, underline the presence of vodou-related meanings.¹² We can also understand certain memories of Amabelle’s as containing spiritual dimensions, such as the hallucination of a talking doll during a childhood illness; this episode potentially represents a “disturbance” suggesting that the narrator possesses, or believes she has the capacity to possess, the gift of second sight. Shemak observes that the narrative furthermore positions Amabelle as a midwife (the narrator helps the Señora give birth, and her parents were “midwives and herb healers in Haiti” [92]) – a role that in Haitian vodou includes the ability to predict the future based on the circumstances surrounding birth (Houlberg 270).

These traces and suggestions of vodou form the cultural context in which Amabelle struggles to understand the meaning of accidents, coincidence, and ultimately, death. Even before the massacre, events such as the accidental death of Sebastien’s friend Joël, followed by the sudden death of the Señora’s son, cause the narrator to ponder the existence of a greater order in the world. Are these two events connected, evidence of an unseen system of justice, or are they simply coincidence? The subsequent accumulation of tragic events, culminating with the massacre, raises the possibility that pure accident

reigns. Within a world characterized by danger, loss, and the “shadows” of those who have passed away, Amabelle struggles to find order and safety (4); as a result, she dedicates her story to Metrès Dlo and engages in an internal, if submerged, dialogue with vodou. Thus it is entirely consonant with the novel’s frame of reference to suggest that Papa Legba is a central figure informing *The Farming of Bones*. In fact, not to do so is to miss some of the novel’s most provocative AfroCaribbean intertextualities and resonances.

Dis/ability in the Crossroads

Tibon and Pwofesè, both minor characters with Legba-like characteristics, appear at two important moments in Amabelle’s journey: at the beginning of her travels, and at the end. Their presence highlights the qualities of danger and opportunity that define the crossroads, and their company enables the narrator to continue forward in her difficult voyage. Furthermore, understanding them as disabled figures – characters who, like Legba, encompass the seemingly contradictory qualities of fragility and strength – highlights the centrality of the body and the experiences of dis/ability during any physical, psychological, and emotional journey. Thus these crossroads figures ask us to expand simplified definitions of disability to encompass more complex understandings of the body and identity.

The first Legba figure surfaces during Amabelle’s long trip home. Once the danger of the massacre became evident, the narrator visits Kongo, who performs a ritual to protect her on the “trail of rivers and mountains” back to Haiti (146). During her subsequent journey, this protection manifests itself in Tibon, a solitary man who has a limp and an emaciated arm. The narrator first notices Tibon when she is traveling with a motley group of Haitian refugees toward the border. There is “a short man in the rear who was limping [with] uneven arms, one bulky, bulging with muscles, the other thin and withered, the skin clinging to the bones” (171). She wonders about him and the cause of his disability:

I moved towards the man with the uneven arms. I was drawn to him in part by curiosity but also because I pitied his condition. I wanted him to explain it to me. Was it tuberculosis or a flesh disease? Did it come from cutting the cane with one arm while neglecting the other? Was he born this way?

The young man seemed to forget his malformation unless someone’s eyes lingered on it too long. He straightened his posture and pushed his chest forward to make his arms seem of one proportion. (172)

Amabelle’s combined experience of curiosity and pity suggests her own complex desire to understand the reasons for his “deformity.” His physical condition seems to trouble her, and so she seeks to deduce its causes (illness? accident? hard labor? genetics?) in order to understand him. Her stare, of course, reduces the young man to his disability while it reminds him of his “malform[ed]” arm. His response is to attempt to pass as normal, to “straighten[...] his posture and push [...] his chest forward to make his arms seem of one proportion.” This moment exemplifies an observation made by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who explains how the act of staring at the disabled establishes difference and a hierarchy of power:

Because staring at disability is considered illicit looking, the disabled body is at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at, further dramatizing the staring encounter by making viewers furtive and the viewed defensive. Staring thus creates disability as a state of absolute difference rather than simply one more variation in human form. At the same time, staring constitutes disability identity by manifesting the power relations between the subject positions of disabled and able-bodied. (57)

Amabelle is unwittingly participating in the power dynamic that constructs the young man as disabled and herself as the norm. Ironically, although she has been constructed as an “other” by Dominicans, she herself reifies a similar binary with a fellow Haitian who is disabled.

Yet Garland-Thomson’s observations about staring do not fully account for Amabelle’s gaze. For while the narrator’s stare magnifies their difference, she subsequently seeks to establish a connection with the young man. Soon after she first sees Tibon, they become friendly; she walks next to him, listens to his story, and they help each other out along the way. At one point, she realizes that she is “holding his skeletal hand” (181); occasionally he “put his skeletal hand on my shoulder when we had to stop and let a group of people squeeze by” (189). While the repetition of “skeletal” suggests that she is, at all times, aware of his disability, they have also become equals. Both are hunted by the Dominicans, and both help each other to escape.

Tibon furthermore confounds both Amabelle’s and the reader’s expectations of what it means to be disabled. Like many of the Haitian characters who have survived the massacre, Tibon is compelled to share his story. It is a story of strength and survival: when the Dominicans attacked him, he survived a jump off a high cliff. His limp, we learn, is caused by this fall, when the sea, “more like a big machete than water,” slices his ankles (175). He evades yet more Dominicans by swimming to a sea cave and hiding until nightfall, when he begins his long walk to safety. Tibon’s mantra is one of survival – “I say now and until my last breath, if I die, I die on my feet” (175). As a survivor, he is also a fighter. When Amabelle and her fellow Haitians travelers are attacked by a crowd in Dajabón, he viciously charges his assailants, sinking his teeth into a teenager’s neck and refusing to be pried away. His attack is unexpected, and although he is killed, he dies fighting – once again disrupting any expectation that being disabled means being weak.

Tibon, quite simply, is not what he appears. He poses to Amabelle the difficulties of understanding someone by what is visible; just as she cannot determine nationality by skin color, she cannot learn much, if anything, about a person based on the visible presence of disability.¹³ Still, she tries. Once she returns to Haiti, she constantly wonders about the connection between visible disabilities and the massacre: “I strolled like a ghost through the waking life of the Cap, wondering whenever I saw people with deformities – anything from a broken nose to crippled legs – had they been there?” (243). But the presence of visible disabilities eludes ready interpretation. And her experience, much like her encounter with Tibon, demonstrates how Danticat’s novel complicates the attempt to “read” the body.

At the very end of *The Farming of Bones*, the narrator returns to the Dominican Republic and visits the *lieux de mémoire* that have haunted her for so many years: the waterfall and the Massacre River (Larrier 55). The river becomes a second transitional space that completes the journey Amabelle began on the road out of Alegría, and another solitary figure appears as a guardian of this crossroads. At the river, Amabelle finds

herself accompanied by a “crazy man,” a “tall, bowlegged old man with a tangled gray beard” whom the washing women have nicknamed “Pwofesè” (285). Like Amabelle, he has been irrevocably changed by the massacre: “The professor’s not been the same since the slaughter,” one of the women explains (285). Amabelle recognizes in him a kindred soul, and as she looks at him, she speaks the final words of the novel: “He, like me, was looking for the dawn” (310). Her intense identification with him is immediate, unlike her hesitant attempts to interpret Tibon’s physical disabilities. She immediately understands him as a survivor who, like herself, continues to move forward in the aftermath of trauma.

The appearance of a second Legba figure underscores the complex pairing of human fragility and resilience in this final scene. At the river, the narrator removes her clothes, “slip[s] into the current,” and floats (310):

The water was warm for October, warm and shallow, so shallow that I could lie on my back in it with my shoulders only half submerged, the current floating over me in a less than gentle caress, the pebbles in the riverbed scouring my back.

I looked to my 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)

In the river, Amabelle seeks out a place in which she is not required to pledge allegiance to any one nation. The river is a borderland in the way that Gloria Anzaldúa understands it, as a place that permits the existence of those who do not fit elsewhere and that has been created by the “bleed[ing]” of the two nations on either side (Anzaldúa 25). However, Shemak warns us against naïvely celebratory readings of the border, observing that Amabelle’s “ritual cleansing” contains “contradictory images” suggesting the “ambiguous nature of the border’s history” (105). This is important; for while the moment contains hope, it is by no means a happy ending. It does not rewrite what has happened to the narrator, or the other survivors of the massacre. It is, in many ways, an ambiguous and indeterminate ending that purposefully brings us to the uncertain territory of the crossroads, a place that contains both danger and opportunity.

Danticat’s description of the river suggests these contradictory forces. The river encompasses death (her own parents’ death; the “fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed”) as well as healing (the river is governed by *Metres Dlo*, Mother of the Rivers; the water is warm; the currents provide a rough “caress”). Here, in the place of Amabelle’s original loss, she finally looks to her “dreams” and her memories for “relief” instead of torment. In her moment of floating, both an intensely embodied moment as well as a disembodied one, we are left with a narrator who has found a place where she can be at peace with her body and the violence of her past, at least temporarily. Perhaps, then, we can understand this scene as the moment when Amabelle finally embraces all of the losses that have defined her identity and creates a new self out of loss. This interpretation is borne out by the text’s suggestion that in the river, she gives birth to herself: she is described as “cradled by the current, paddling like a newborn in a washbasin” (310). In this moment, however fleeting and tentative, the narrator seems to accept her existence as a wounded, disabled, and lonely old woman.

At this moment of heightened self-awareness, we can understand Amabelle as simultaneously wounded and whole, injured and healed, able-bodied and disabled. In this

highly evocative image, the reader is left with a woman who embodies the contradictions of the crossroads. For those of us interested in the field of disability studies, this image presents another crossroads: at the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, in the intermingling of EuroAmerican and AfroCaribbean epistemologies, an invitation to explore the intersections of trauma and disability.

Notes

¹ Estimates vary, but the figure of 15,000 deaths is cited by a number of historians, including Turits.

² The killing began on October 3 of that year and lasted almost two weeks, in spite of Trujillo's command that it end on October 8. See Wucker.

³ See *The Farming of Bones* (299) and Turits (590). Trujillo subsequently refused to claim responsibility for the attacks, blaming them instead on Dominican peasants who were, he claimed, defending themselves against uprising Haitians. See Wucker, chapter two.

⁴ I am grateful to Jennifer James for pointing this out. See Wood's discussion of the representation of pain and torture during slavery (263-71).

⁵ Also see Johnson's discussion of Danticat's novel and the tradition of *testimonio*.

⁶ As explained by Danticat in a reading on Sept. 13, 1999.

⁷ As Shemak argues, the novel exhibits a certain ambivalence over the "transformative or recuperative potential of testimonial narrative" (106).

⁸ For more on the comparison between Esu and Legba, see Cosentino and Dayan.

⁹ Mackandal stands in stark contrast to the able-bodied and hyper-masculine figure of the Dominican *caudillo*, or "strong man on the horse" – figures such as Christopher Columbus and General Trujillo – who "fed the Dominican myth of the Great Man" (Wucker 66).

¹⁰ See Laguerre (52-4) and Benítez-Rojo (160-1).

¹¹ The issue of *marassa* also comes up in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. See Chancy. Houlberg explains the power of twins as follows: "The Marasa join Papa Legba as the guardians of the crossroads where the world of above meets the world of below, where the world of the living intersects with the world of the dead" (268). Also see Shemak's discussion of marasa (92).

¹² The caul and umbilical cord further highlight the fact that the twins have special powers. Vodou beliefs include a category of "sacred children" that encompasses twins as well as "breech births (i.e. feet first); children born with a full head of hair or with several teeth; albinos; those born with the umbilical cord around their neck or other parts of their body; hunchbacks; dwarfs; hydrocephalic children; and those born in the caul (amniotic sac)" (Houlberg 270).

¹³ Amabelle travels for a while with two women who "seemed like they might be Dominicans – or a mix of Haitian and Dominican – in some cases it was hard to tell" (171). This theme of the interpretive difficulties surrounding the body, including bodily scars and marks, surfaces in Danticat's other work. Most notably, in her recent novel *The*

Dew Breaker (2004), the author deconstructs the identities of torturer and tortured by exposing the difficulties of reading a bodily scar. See Hewett (341-42). Also see Shemak's exploration of these interpretive ambiguities (what she terms the "inherent fragility of corporeal testaments," 104).

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