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Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*

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“A border is a veil not many people can wear”:

Testimonial Fiction and Transnational Healing in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on recent attempts to reconcile the divergent nations of Hispaniola, I will examine the ways in which fiction by U.S. immigrant writers Danticat and Rosario looks back to the traumatic history of race relations on Hispaniola and the 1937 massacre as a means of approaching reconciliation and healing amongst the inhabitants of Hispaniola. As invested outsiders to their homelands, Danticat and Rosario may work, as Chancy suggests, in the capacity of actors for Hispaniola. Both Danticat and Rosario graciously admit that their writing is largely contingent on the relative freedom from censure that their American citizenship affords them. In this capacity, these immigrant writers are uniquely able to revisit a traumatic cultural past to give voice to its widely arrayed victims and to provide an interrogation of the makings of horrific brutality. Despite the largely U.S. American readership, these authors foster a form of reconciliation through their works by forcing the audience to move past dichotomous thinking about the massacre, but also about the boundaries between the two nations.

“...in traumatic times like ours, when reality itself is so distorted as to have become impossible and abnormal, it is the function of all culture, partaking of this abnormality, to be aware of its own sickness. To be aware of the unreality or inauthenticity of the so-called real, is to reinterpret this reality. To reinterpret this reality is to commit oneself to a constant revolutionary assault against it.”

(“We Must Learn to Sit Down and Talk about a Little Culture,” Sylvia Wynter 31)

Introduction

During the late days of September and early days of October 1937, General Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina ordered the purging of Haitians from the Dominican Republic. Centuries of strife on the island, combined with increased anti-Haitian rhetoric, produced a massacre that lasted approximately four days.¹ Conservative estimates place the death toll at 12,000.² The majority of the violence occurred between October 2 and October 8. Using machetes—weapons chosen to allow peasant participation in the killings—government troops brutally massacred Haitians, Dominicans of Haitian descent,

¹ For an incisive history of political relations on Hispaniola, see Eugenio Matibag’s *Haiti-Dominican Counterpoint: Nation, State, and Race on Hispaniola*.

² Beginning in late September and ending on October 4th, 1937, the Dominican government ordered the massacre of between 12,000 and 25,000 Haitians (Hicks 112). Richard Turits observes that Haitian clergy and officials accounted for 12,168 victims immediately following the massacre, but also acknowledges estimates as high as 20,000, obtained through a comparison of parish records before and after the massacre (591). Other estimates place the death toll as high as 35,000 (Sagás 46). Because of the nature of the executions and the diversity among the victims, estimating a death toll is particularly challenging.

and dark-skinned people who could not prove they were not Haitians.³ After the massacre, the river was renamed *El Massacre*, as it was rumored to have run red with the blood of the victims (Derby 488). The unprecedented brutality of these days left the nations on either side of the border in shock.

Historically, the island of Hispaniola has been divided along the Dajabón since Spain ceded a portion of its colony to France in 1697. Following the Treaty of Ryswick, the now-French portion of the island became Saint Domingue and remained a colony until the successful Haitian Revolution in 1804. After the divide, varying colonial and slave-owning practices produced starkly different racial identities on either side of the island. In Saint Domingue, the French operated the land as an exploitation colony; exporting goods, but not settling within the colony. After the Haitian Revolution, few white French lived on the island. There was a racial caste system within Saint Domingue, as Stewart R. King notes in *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue*; however, the stratification on the Spanish side of the island was more visible.⁴

While Saint Domingue remained populated by predominantly African-descended peoples, the population on the Spanish side of the island became increasingly intermixed and racially hierarchized. Eugenio Matibag notes that beginning in the late 17th century, the “propertied elites abandoned the failing colony” and “mulattos gained in status” (45). During this shift, the mulattos and free blacks were referred to as “*blancos de la tierra*,”

³ Specifically addressing the calculated choice of weapon, Eugenio Matibag notes the contrast between the official narrative of the slaughter and the government orchestration necessary to produce it.

⁴ King discusses the presence and economic and social significance of this small class of free peoples of color in pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue.

which suggests that the history of Dominican slavery “was mitigated somewhat by the close association of distinct races” (Matibag 45). This shifting did not reduce the degree to which Dominican society was striated along the color line, but did suggest a more intermingled ethnic group.

In the centuries following the island’s independence from each of its former colonizers, historians suggest a great degree of exchange and interplay existed between the developing nations. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing until the 1930s, the nations established an economic exchange, as rising demand for sugar cane increased the demand for cane cutters (Matibag 129). Further cultural and economic interchange occurred across the border and is evident in oral histories from the period. As Richard Turits notes, “Many residents traversed the border repeatedly over the course of a single day” (595). According to Turits’s consultation of school log books in 1937, “ethnic Haitian children went to Haiti to attend school, crossed back to the Dominican Republic for lunch, then returned to school in Haiti in the afternoon, and finally came back home to Dominican territory in the evening” (595). Markets were also a source of great cross-cultural contact in the borderlands, as vendors and customers would travel across the river to sell or procure goods.⁵ Despite a history of interdependence, the events of 1937 polarized the island nations.

Although ethnic groupings on the island were almost entirely the remnants of colonial domination—the extermination of large portions of the indigenous population, the importation of enslaved peoples through the Transatlantic trade, the intermarriage

⁵ Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* also depicts this transnational activity in scenes of her protagonist’s childhood, describing a trip across the border to purchase cookware.

between Spanish or French colonizers and the indigenous or slave peoples, among other practices—ethnicity and cultural purity emerged as concerns within the Dominican Republic after independence. In *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*, Ernesto Sagás argues that *antihaitianismo*, the anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic, was a dual-focused prejudice, in which Haitians were derided at once for being both a “‘French’ culture and civilization” and for being racially “non-European” (24-5). In the Dominican Republic, as in much of Europe, Haiti was derided as a nation of slaves—savage, unsophisticated, and threatening to the civilized culture across the border.⁶ The cultural and linguistic divide on the island, established during the colonial period, provided Trujillo with much of the basis for his campaign of ethnic cleansing.⁷

For the Trujillo regime, the Haitian massacre was part of a broader campaign of fascist nationalism. Cultivating an ethos of *antihaitianismo*, Trujillo demonized diasporic African cultural influence and elevated Spanish colonial heritage. As Eric Paul Roorda argues in *The Dictator Next Door*, Trujillo capitalized on a history of Haitian invasion and occupations in drumming up anti-Haitian sentiment (129). In attempting to forge a unifying national identity for the Dominican Republic, Trujillo developed a frontier policy aimed at “clarifying the boundary with Haiti and imposing on the eastern side of the order the kind of Dominican society imagined from the perspective of the capital” (129). His model for a new Dominican nation was the “self-consciously Hispanic

⁶ Eugenio Matibag’s discussion on the different forms of slave labor in Saint Domingue and Santo Domingo may provide some insight into the distinction Dominicans made between Haitians and themselves, despite their shared slave history. According to Matibag, “the Saint-Domingue slaves were normally sent to labor in the fields or to process in the sheds,” while Santo-Domingo slaves were either set to tasks such as “round[ing] up their owner’s herd” or loaned out to neighbor for a sum (58). The treatment of slaves may likely have contributed to hierarchized notions of ethnicity post-emancipation.

⁷ A complicated history of invasion during and after the Revolution and border struggles also contributed to tensions between Dominicans and Haitians.

population farther east”—farther from the Haitian border” (129). Because of its high concentration of mixed heritage individuals, the borderlands between Haiti and the Dominican Republic became the focus of Trujillo’s purge.

Although the ramifications were felt throughout the island, the violence was concentrated in the border towns near the Dajabón River where the populations were heavily integrated. According to Richard Lee Turits, government troops entered the Cibao region, referred to by Dominicans as *La Frontera*, which lies between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (590). This borderland region is comprised of the “present-day provinces of Monte Cristi, Dajabón, Santiago Rodríguez...Pedernales, Barahona, Independencia, and most of Baoruco, San Juan, and Elías Piña” (590). Positioned along the border, this region experienced a long history of cultural intermingling. Generations of Haitian workers lived and often married amongst Dominicans in these towns and the people often interchanged Spanish and Kreyòl depending on the company. Many of those killed had been born in the Dominican Republic or were children of families whose roots in that region extended several generations (Turits 590). Workers on U.S. owned sugar plantations were generally spared during the massacre because the nation’s trade in sugar was vital to its economy, and, as a result, many others were harbored in these spaces (Matibag 147). This exclusion also meant that a large percentage of those killed were small farmers of Dominican birth, who were, as Turits notes, Dominican citizens as defined by the Dominican constitution (590). Recognition of these victims alongside the Haitians killed during the genocide is essential to any project of reconciliation.

During the days of the massacre, cultural authenticity became the deciding factor for survival. One of the primary methods of identification was a simple interrogation of the would-be victim's native tongue; if the suspected Haitian could not properly pronounce the word *perejil*, the Spanish equivalent of the Kreyol *pesi* or the English *parsley*, then he/she was sentenced to death. Language, not skin color, was the deciding factor in the purges. The necessity for language as a tool of authentication illustrates the nature of the intensely hybridized culture that existed throughout the borderlands between the nations. This form of cultural identification also speaks to the homogenization of non-Dominican peoples during the event; failure to properly pronounce the Spanish *ere* and *jota* in succession marks the speaker a non-native Spanish speaker, but does not prove that he/she is Haitian. Turitus confirms this tendency to generalize all deemed "foreign" as "Haitians" (597). Beliefs in racial superiority clearly played a role in Trujillo's motives, but the perceived threat to Dominican cultural practices and mores became a strong motivating factor. Central to Trujillo's attempts at nation-building was the centrality and superiority of *hispanidad*, and those who could not be made to fit this cultural identity simply had no place in the Dominican Republic.⁸

The Haitian Massacre, one in the rash of ethnic cleanses during the twentieth century, is often overlooked, or considered an isolated event; however, as Eric Paul Roorda argues in *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930–1945*, the 1937 massacre should be treated alongside other genocidal atrocities including the Rape of Nanking and the German

⁸ According to David Howard, racism became "a founding component of *Trujillismo*" in the attempt "to consolidate the Dominican nation-state on the superiority of *hispanidad*" (29).

Holocaust.⁹ Roorda notes a number of eerie similarities between the totalitarian governments of Generalissimo Trujillo and Führer Adolf Hitler. According to Roorda, Trujillo began to imitate “Hitler’s style of leadership,” began fashioning himself after Hitler by adopting the “greatcoat and jackboots (unusual attire for the tropics)” and had “recently mandated that members of the Partido Dominicano, the only legal political party, greet each other with a kind of ‘Sieg Heil’ salute instead of the usual handshake” (133). Parallels between the National Socialist Party of Germany and the Trujillato are clear evidence that Trujillo modeled much of his political policy on Hitler’s.

Although the details of Trujillo’s behavior read as frightening—and perhaps bizarre—imitations of Hitler’s, the most significant of these parallels is the politically strategic manipulation of racial tensions. As in Nazi Germany, genocide became a tool for Trujillo’s regime, allowing Dominican national identity to be forged through opposition, rather than integration. Jingoistic rhetoric fomented and fostered pre-existing racial tensions.¹⁰ Although the historical connections between General Rafael Trujillo

⁹ Although Roorda notes these two genocidal events in discussing the Haitian massacre, a more developed inquiry into the frequency and intensity of genocides throughout the twentieth century might yield greater understanding. In “Looming Prairies and Blooming Orchids: The Politics of Sex and Race in Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*” Marion Rohrleitner traces a triadic relationship between the U.S., Spain, and the Dominican Republic, connecting the Haitian massacre to racial riots in the United States and to Franco’s purges in the Spanish Republic. Rohrleitner also likens the methods of Trujillo’s genocide to the 1994 Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis (198). Trujillo’s ethnic cleanse may also be compared to the genocidal campaign in the Biafra Civil War, 1967-70, Menghistu’s purges in 1975-1978 in Ethiopia, Obote’s, and later, Amin’s genocidal campaign in the 1980s in Uganda, Mugabe’s actions in Zimbabwe from 1982-87, Montt’s actions in Guatemala in 1982-83, Saddam Hussein’s Al-Anfal Campaign in 1986-89, and contemporary genocidal activities in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Placed in context with not only the German Holocaust and the Rape of Nanking, but also with genocidal massacres prevalent in former European colonies post-independence, the Haitian massacre takes on particular significance. As in the other former colonies, divisions drawn by imperial powers became the source of conflict upon the island.

¹⁰ Richard Turits suggests that racial tensions on the island heightened dramatically in the years following the massacre. Although Turits holds that anti-Haitian sentiment intensified greatly after 1937, he does not argue that the conditions of genocide did not predate the massacre. Rather than forging a more

and Adolf Hitler are difficult to ignore, it is perhaps the broad scale suffering of those victimized during both the dictatorial regimes themselves and the broad scale ethnic cleansings that links Hispaniola to Europe. The geographic and cultural circumstances of the 1937 massacre and the German Holocaust vary; however, the historical links and similarities between Nazi Germany and Trujillo-era Dominican Republic permit an overlap in the theoretical framework used in discussing the traumatic repercussions of these events. Because the massacre left victims from both ends of the island, Holocaust studies provide a framework through which this act of genocidal violence may be understood as well. Remembrance and reconciliation have long been terms in discussions of post-War Europe, and should appear in this context as well.

The question then becomes how to cultivate future relations while acknowledging the atrocities of the past. Because of this interdependent history, representations and discussions of the 1937 massacre require a nuanced approach to border theory. The recent trend in historical studies of this conflict is to broaden the approach, encompassing a wider array of interdependence and a more dialectical model for understanding relations. Proposing a “new kind of frontier thesis, Eugenio Matibag attempts to “see beyond the familiar story of hostilities, looking for particular connections to reveal a lesser-known, holistic narrative of interdependencies and reciprocal influence that have shaped each country’s identity” (3). Searching for a “persistent mutuality, a systematic relationality” between “the Dominican Republic and Haiti”, Matibag proposes a far less contentious mode for understanding the historical and current relations between these conjoined

cohesive national identity, the purges heightened tensions between light-skinned Dominicans and other Dominicans and polarized the beliefs of both nations involved in the cleanse.

nations (3). Matibag views the island not as an arena for conflict—criticizing Michelle Wucker’s *Why the Cocks Fight*¹¹ for reductively doing so—but rather as a complex system of negotiation and flux. Noting that “true, the cocks must fight, Haiti and the Dominican Republic must confront one another in an ongoing contest for land, power, and resources,” Matibag also insists that “a deeper mystery lies beyond the conflicts of the surface” and that a greater dependency lies with it (2). Matibag argues that a future “beyond distrust and despair” may be attained by “searching out a new kind of boundary, in working with the insular difference [and] in using duality ‘for the benefit of each of the peoples’” (215).

This instance of genocide in the world merits significant interpretation, not only for its historical significance—including the hows and whys of its occurrence—but also for its continued relevance in contemporary Dominican-Haitian relations. Indeed, as Turits argues, “the story of the Haitian massacre is also one of Dominicans versus Dominicans, of Dominican elites versus Dominican peasants, of the national state against Dominicans in the frontier...and, following the massacre, of newly hegemonic anti-Haitian discourses of the nation vying with more culturally pluralist discourses and memories from the past” (Turits 593). Turits argues that the antithetical construction of Dominican identity developed after the massacre. Although, as Turits observes, “[c]urrent representations of the massacre speak to contemporary problems of

¹¹ Wucker’s book adopts the cockfight—a tradition central to both Haitian and Dominican culture—as a dominating metaphor to explain the relations between the neighboring nations of Hispaniola. Citing the contained, ring-like space, and the instigative role of world powers such as the U.S., Spain, and France, Wucker suggests that the tense relations on the island may be understood in much the same way as the cockfight. Although an imaginative and accessible text, Wucker’s analysis is, as Matibag notes, somewhat reductive in its suggestions of cause-effect relations.

immigration, ethnic conflict, and racism,” such tension and strife did not always exist in such diametric terms prior to 1937 (593).¹² In aspiring to reconciliation between the conjoined nations, it is perhaps instructive to examine the violent outburst that sits at the center of the conflict.

The historian’s project of reconciliation was echoed in 2004 when *Meridians* hosted a roundtable discussion entitled “Voices of Hispaniola” to “celebrate Haiti’s 200th Anniversary of Independence” (69). During this discussion “authors representing both sides of the island spoke to the realities of the conjoined histories of Haitians and Dominicans from women’s perspectives by reading from recent creative works and engaging in public dialogue on the current crises facing Hispaniola” (69). Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Pérez, Myriam J. A. Chancy, and Nelly Rosario discuss the unique role of the woman writer to interrogate and dismantle factious nationalist rhetoric that pervades discussions of Haitian-Dominican borderlands. The discussion aimed to bridge gaps between cultures and to promote an interdisciplinary dialogue regarding the project of reconciliation on Hispaniola. Specifically engaging Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness, these writers explicate their role—as women writers and/or feminists—in negotiating the unequal relations of power and influence on the island.

Although many writers have engaged images of Trujillo and the days of the Trujillato, few fiction writers have confronted the Haitian Massacre. Haitian author

¹² Richard Turits’s argument takes a stronger stance on the issue of preexisting *antihaitianismo* in the Dominican Republic than does Ernesto Sagás’s analysis in *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Sagás argues that “the Trujillo regime and its intellectuals did not invent *antihaitianismo*; it already was an integral part of Dominican culture” (46). According to Sagás, Trujillo and his regime merely worked to escalate these preexisting notions.

Jacques Stephen Alexis's *General Sun, My Brother* in 1955 (translated in 1999), former Poet Laureate of the United States Rita Dove's "Parsley" in 1983, Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies* in 1994, Haitian author Louis-Philippe Dalembert's *L'Autre Face de La Mer Roman* 1998, and Junot Diaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2008 all treat aspects of the Haitian-Dominican relationship and—to some extent—the 1937 massacre. More direct treatments of the massacre occur in Edwidge Danticat's 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* and Nelly Rosario's 2003 novel *Song of the Water Saints*. Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* examines the days of the slaughter and the years of traumatic suffering that follow, while Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* embeds a truncated narrative of the massacre within a tri-generational narrative of the lives of a family of Dominican women.

In approaching the purpose of these works and the treatment of the massacre, the *Meridians* roundtable may provide some insight into the renegotiation of identity in the post-Trujillo period of the island's history. Rather than viewing the island as two opposing nations, virulently pitted against one another in a struggle for dominance in the constricted space of the island, Danticat, Pérez, Chancy, and Rosario anticipate a vision of the island as a whole, as Hispaniola. As Myriam J.A. Chancy notes, "...history and politics...[have] conspired to keep [Dominicans and Haitians] from articulating a sense of oneness on this little land mass, which is Hispaniola" (Candelario 74). Because of this, Chancy admits that "home becomes very difficult to define because [she] think[s] of home as Haiti but [she] always [has] this sense of Hispaniola as well," a feeling of "being part Dominican and having the sense that the division can't really be as real as it's

made out to be” (Candelario 74). As part of a feminist vision—despite her inability to enter Haiti as an outspoken feminist—Chancy seeks an approach to intra-island relations which avoids patriarchal assertions of independence which “reinscrib[e]” “the same kinds of models so that home becomes again a division, Dominican Republic versus Haiti” (74). Chancy’s project of reunion is predicated on the notion that reuniting Hispaniola will serve to heal wounds inflicted by centuries of strife.

Somewhat in contrast to Chancy’s vision, Loida Maritza Pérez suggests that Hispaniola, different from other islands because of its internal borders, bears “a constant reminder of European imperialism and of the hostilities that ensue when two [colonial] entities lay claim to a single island” (79). This physical and socio-political division “prevents the metaphor of island from being the most adequate for Hispaniola. It is not an entity unto itself, nor does its being an island exclusively inform its identity” (Candelario 79). Although Pérez emphasizes the distinction between the two island nations in her description of Hispaniola, she implies that conceptualizing the island for what it is would provide the type of transformative consciousness its would need in order to move forward from a history of brutal violence. Pérez’s conception of the Dominican Republic and Haiti seems, at first, somewhat divisive, but is intended to produce peaceful coexistence, much as efforts to unite the island intend to create. Somewhat problematic with Pérez’s call for separation in the study of the island is the history of interdependence made evident in Matibag’s study.¹³ While the countries have two very different histories and

¹³ Pérez conceptualizes Hispaniola using the border as a more adequate metaphor. According to Pérez, Hispaniola “it differs from other islands in that it has borders within itself and consists of two countries...It is not an entity unto itself, nor does its being an island exclusively inform its identity” (79). She suggests that “the notion of borders, rather than of islands, serves as a better metaphor, not only

very different cultural origins, there is an undeniable history of reciprocal relations between the Dominican Republic and Haiti that suggests Hispaniola should also be conceived as a unit.

Another central element to the discussion is the emigrant identity of its participants. Common to each author is the position as both cultural insider and outsider. Speaking for their role in the politics of their homeland, Chancy hopes that emigrant writers like herself “are participating in being actors for the nation-state” through their creative and scholarly writing (Candelario 77). Without “com[ing] off as [an] American imperialist,” Nelly Rosario hopes to bring the “black consciousness,” which was an integral part of her upbringing in the United States to her writing of Dominican life (76). Attending not to a distance of spirit or mentality, but simply one of “physical distance,” Rosario hopes to provide a voice for Dominican culture through her writing. Similarly, Danticat opposes the “dichotomy” that “people always try to force...between writers living in and out of Haiti” on the grounds of geography alone (Candelario 76). She challenges critics, asking if she and other emigrants like her are “supposed to be silent because somebody thinks [they’re] not authentic enough” (Candelario 76). Danticat’s and Rosario’s novels engage homeland culture and history in a way that brings attention to the nations’ trauma without reinscribing unequal relations of power. Theirs is not a project of recolonization, but of forced recognition. Writing historically situated fiction, Danticat and Rosario recount events which have shaped the island and give voice to

historically but also currently, what with so many from Hispaniola seeking to emigrate and being impeded not so much by bodies of water but rather by the artificial boundaries posed by borders” (79). While Pérez’s work is an attempt to “negate or traverse borders” in individual and cultural identity formation, her writing remains centered around the notion of division or, at least, distinction.

imagined figures within that history, yet they do not write definitive accounts of life in a particular place or period. Instead, Danticat and Rosario write as emigrants, using their distance from the island cultures to enable them to address painful histories that remain unspoken. Their hope is to provide understanding of the nature of the conflict on Hispaniola, and to open discourse regarding the tragedy of 1937.

David Cowart takes up this subject in *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* as he discusses notions of hybrid cultural identity in the United States and those works that engage in identifying an immigrant culture or aesthetic while avoiding pitfalls of earlier generations. He argues that fiction by immigrant authors either “signal[s] the extent to which their characters embrace American experience” or “fixate[s] on their past in a lost world, its difficulties or unlivability perceptually transformed, sometimes, by the metastasizing mendacity of retrospect” (209). Although Cowart concentrates much of his study on the negotiation of an immigrant American identity in the works he examines, his discussion of the theoretical frameworks appropriate for immigrant authors is useful. According to Cowart, “first-generation writers have received much attention from critics whose response tends to be modeled on ethnic and postcolonial theory, which emphasizes the conflicts that come with having to live on the margins and write in a non-native language” (3). These emphases, Cowart argues are “often tendentious” and “foreground issues of separateness, diversity, political disenfranchisement, and cultural alienation” (3). Instead of approaching Danticat’s and Rosario’s works through ethnic or postcolonial theory, I engage what Cowart describes as a “desiderated *post*-postcolonial criticism” (3). For Cowart, a post-postcolonial approach

to immigrant fiction would move beyond “cultural balkanizing” that happens in works or critical analyses which “foreground issues of separateness, diversity, political disenfranchisement, and cultural alienation” (3). Writing from the United States, these authors look back to events on their home island, which made it decidedly “unlivable” for the time being. Engaging the history of Hispaniola in their writing, Danticat and Rosario attempt to bear witness to the genocide without maintaining the dichotomy of some postcolonial thought.

As emigrant writers turning back to the historical trauma of their homelands, Edwidge Danticat and Nelly Rosario carve out a particular space within the realm of testimonial or human rights narratives. Their liminal position somewhere between outsider and insider figures their relationship to their chosen material. In her “The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze,” Megan Boler argues that “testimony calls for empathy as necessary to the comprehension of trauma, and necessary to extend cognition to its limits through historical consciousness” (266). Superior to other methods of witnessing trauma, “testimonial reading recognizes its own limits, obstacles, ignorances and zones of numbness, and in so doing offers an ally to truth's representational crisis” forcing the reader to recognize that “one speaker cannot embody and represent the...unquantifiable traumas of [a] historical epoch” (Boler 266). Testimony and human rights narratives provide space for the speaker to bear witness to traumatic experience, but do not end the discourse on the experience alone. As Shosana Felman suggests, testimony does not offer a “completed statement, a totalizable account of those events” (Felman and Laub 5). Instead, throughout the testimony, “language is in

process and in trial; it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as a constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge” (Felman and Laub 5). It is an account, an exploration, perhaps an expurgation of traumatic experience rather than a definitive source of verifiable data. For the reader, testimonial narratives present one way of understanding, one way of coming closer to the meaning of trauma without ending the discourse.

Although the intended outcome of human rights and genocide narratives is to open discourse, provide understanding, and, ultimately, avoid the same type of atrocity from recurring, Megan Boler questions the efficacy and ethics of teaching genocide or holocaust literature(s) arguing that they have the potential to do little more than induce a form of passive empathy in the reader. Eric Sundquist furthers this argument by discussing the ways in which the reader may come to delight in the suffering depicted in such accounts. In “Witness without End?”, Sundquist discusses Norma Rosen’s *Touching Evil* as perhaps one of the oddest and most prescient pieces of Holocaust literature to emerge during the 1970s. Sundquist summarizes the novel as the story of “two American women...neither of them Jewish, [who] watch the televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961” and “ident[ify] obsessively with the testimony of survivor witnesses brought forth in Jerusalem to name the crimes of the Nazi regime” (65). In their obsessive identification with the testifying Holocaust survivors, the American women serve as a warning against the sort of self-gratifying identification an audience disconnected from the traumatic event may begin to feel. Sundquist argues that Rosen’s text “confronts us with the disturbing probability that the atrocities of the Judeocide are seductive, a kind of

pornography through which we lose our innocence, whatever the motive or epiphany, time and again” (66). Sundquist analyzes a type of reader identification which expands upon Boler’s concerns. The “loss of innocence” experience Sundquist discusses is at once painful and delightful. Beyond simply “passive empathy,” the identification Sundquist discusses is a self-edifying desire to subject oneself to ever more knowledge of atrocities, as though reading and knowing will be enough.

While Boler’s and Sundquist’s arguments provide a critical framework for approaching narratives of genocide, I look to the more regionally specific notion of *testimonio* as a model for exploring these testimonial texts. In “The Ethics of Writing the Caribbean,” Ylce Irizarry explores a broader definition of *testimonio* than is traditionally afforded the genre. Combining traditional legal and anthropological definitions of *testimonio* with developments in the study of the ethics of narrative, Irizarry suggests that fictional Latina narratives—specifically Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of Butterflies* and Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*—may be read as *testimonio* because of their clear, purposeful intervention in historicizing narratives of dictatorial oppression. Although bearing witness to atrocities such as military death squads or strategic acts of genocide does not restore the lives or, even, the identities of the victims, Irizarry notes the importance of making government violations known to the international community. Because “exposing human rights abuse remains an important and unfinished objective of *testimonio*,” the act of writing *testimonio*—fictional or nonfictional—is an act of ethical intervention (“The Ethics” 268). In this sense, as one of the primary aims of *testimonio* is to make revisionist interventions in the perception of Caribbean histories. Irizarry

highlights the emphasis on emerging nationalism and its relation to the oppressed as a primary mode of ethical intervention. Through this revisionist project, *testimonio* novels “engag[ing] the reader in a reevaluation of what he or she knows about the Hispanic Caribbean” (269).

An integral part of its representation of the days of massacre, Danticat’s *Farming* is the examination of emergent nationalism in the Dominican Republic, through its intimate look at the victims of the ethnic cleansing under Trujillo. The novel is primarily focused on the suffering of working-class Haitians during the massacre; however, Danticat’s work also suggests that Haitian cane farmers were not the only group to suffer under Trujillo, chronicling the suffering of Señora Valencia, the wife of a *Trujillista*. In this context, Danticat’s depiction of Señora Valencia’s involvement with the *Trujillato* reads less as a condemnation of her complicity, and more an exploration of the means through which Valencia acts as an agent in her own survival. Irizarry’s discussion of the complicity of women under the *Trujillato* in their own oppression is instructive in analyzing the tension between Valencia’s would-be heroic actions during the massacre and her relationship to her *Trujillista* husband. Status has a role in Valencia’s conflict, but, more importantly, Valencia’s personal sense of security is contingent upon obedience to her husband, and, thus, complicity in the Trujillo campaign.

Irizarry’s reading of *testimonio* also elucidates my reading of *Song of the Water Saints*, as it provides justification for the novel’s markedly different approach to witnessing. Rosario’s novel is neither written in Spanish, nor narrated by a witness to the massacre; instead, it is addressed to the North American community, and narrated in the

third person. The novel takes as its primary subject three underprivileged Dominican women. This focus allows Rosario to complicate notions of complicity and survival throughout the novel. Although it does not, as a traditional *testimonio* does, convey the individual experience as an authentic narrative of the events, it does invoke a collective memory of the days of the Trujillo regime. Noting that *testimonio* “always depicts communal experience,” Irizarry’s definition of the genre allows a reading of Rosario’s novel through the framework of *testimonio* (6). In its exploration of the methods of self-preservation and survival, Rosario’s *Song* affords humanity to representative characters struggling to survive under the *Trujillato*.

Read within the context of both testimonial narratives writ large and the specific tradition of *testimonio*, Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* participate in the creation of revisionist history, making interventions on the behalf of those whose lives were affected by Trujillo regime and the brutality it sanctioned. Directed at Anglophone audiences, both novels contribute to the project of informing the international, specifically the North American community, not only of the atrocities committed during this era, but also of the complex system of power relations that produced it. In the post-script to *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez outlines a similar project of international education. Directly addressing those “Dominicans separated by language from the world [she has] created,” Alvarez states that she “hope[s] this book deepens many North Americans’ understanding of the nightmares [Dominicans] have endured and the heavy losses [they] have suffered—of which [her novel] only tells a few” (324). The Trujillo era, she believes, is an “epoch in the life of

the Dominican Republic that...can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination” (324). As immigrant writers like Alvarez, admittedly writing from places of economic and political stability, Danticat and Rosario are free to engage the imagination in this way, to re-envision the past and begin the process of reinventing the future.

To this end, neither Danticat nor Rosario provides a sweeping condemnation of those responsible for or complicit in the massacre, and neither presents a sentimental lament for its victims. In writing their fiction, Danticat and Rosario refuse to dismiss it as either an isolated incident of unimaginable brutality or a regrettable, but understandable tragedy. A negotiation of responsibility and compassion occurs in both novels as the authors seek to give voice to some of the more silent victims of Trujillo’s regime. The way in which hybrid subjects such as Amabelle, Sebastien, and Mustafá receive voices in these novels forces a reexamination of the victim/victimizer dichotomy. Through compassionate representations of the victimizers—particularly through Rosario’s Mustafá who is at once victim and victimizer—these novels force a reconsideration of historical memory. Emphasizing the degree to which all inhabitants of Hispaniola were victims to Trujillo’s violent oppression, these novels implicate the responsible and mitigate easily placed blame. Each approach implicates the complicit while exploring the material circumstances of that complicity.

“The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod” (266).

Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*

The Farming of Bones, Edwidge Danticat’s fictional first-person narrative told by a survivor of the days of massacre that fits squarely in the tradition of testimonial narrative, calls readers to reexamine the horrors of what was once an almost-forgotten tragedy.¹⁴ Confronting trauma as it does, Danticat’s novel defies Morrison’s resonant “this is not a story to pass on” in *Beloved*.¹⁵ Instead, Danticat’s narrator feels, after her

¹⁴ A wealth of scholarship on Danticat’s novel situates it with respect to its function either as *testimonio* or as testimonial fiction. One of the first to discuss the novel in this context is April Shemak’s “Re-membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” which stops short of labeling the novel *testimonio*, but does place the novel in comparison with the nonfictional genre. In “Re-membering Hispaniola: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” April Shemak traces the correlations between the rising Caribbean tradition of *testimonio* and Danticat’s narrative. Although I read the project of the novel as an act of fictional re-membering, the particular ways in which Danticat’s narrative most strikingly reconciles victim and victimizer in the novel come not only through the parallels Shemak traces, but also through the novel’s positioning of various types of trauma. Most recently, Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s “At the Intersection of Trauma and Testimonio: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*” takes a nuanced approach to the novel within the framework of *testimonio*, looking both at the nonfictional genre and its fictional derivative, the testimonial novel. In it, she argues that Danticat’s novel may be read as a “case study” which “foreground[s] the inherent tensions between fiction that narrates historical trauma and what Linda Craft has called the testimonial novel (fiction sharing fundamental characteristics with non-fictional *testimonios*), even while it also attests to the strong converges between these two critical classifications” (6). More provocatively, she suggests that, through its moments which serve an “incidental *testimonio*” function within the novel, citing such examples as the Dominican treatment of Haitian laborers and Father Romain’s recitation of *antihaitianismo* after his life-saving escape across the border.

¹⁵ In “A comparative study of Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* and Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Susana Vega-Gonzalez explores the connections of traumatic loss and memory in these novels. In her article,

traumatic experiences, that all that remains is the narrative. *Farming* begins in 1937, just days before the October massacre and voices character-narrator Amabelle Desir's life beginning with her encounter with the brutality of those days and following her through the beginning stages of healing decades later.

Amabelle's narrative hinges on her need to write her way back to Sebastien; however, in so doing, she must also represent her experiences as one of thousands of Haitian refugees who fled during the massacre. Thus, the novel becomes a narrative of both testimony and healing. Addressing the intersections between *testimonio* and testimonial fiction, Marta Caminero-Santangelo suggests that both forms exhibit a "synecdochic modality" which she defines as "the need that one story stand not just for itself, but rather for the collective recounting of trauma" (8). In many ways, the narrating Amabelle exercises this "synecdochic" methodology: first, she (re)unites her narrative with Sebastien's to the best of her ability; second, she interweaves stories related by other refugee and witnesses; third, she represents, through Amabelle's failure to recover Sebastien in any real sense, the traumatic loss experienced by both nations. In so doing, Amabelle upsets stable notions of the functionality of testimonial fiction. Within the frame of the narrative, Danticat represents the place of personal trauma and loss in the national-scale tragedy as the protagonist joins a small, ragged group of refugees in their flight to the border. Danticat's project of recovery and reconciliation—re-membering, as it were—is achieved largely through the representation of the intersecting suffering of a vast array of people.

Vega-Gonzalez more thoroughly explores the notion of rememory and the implications of trauma narrative in both novels.

Taking the massacre as its central event, Danticat's novel provides an incisive treatment of the brutality and its effect on Hispaniola. In her attempt to represent a history not directly her own, Danticat is primarily concerned with giving voice to those who suffered and those who died during this genocidal atrocity. Although she surrenders the novel to narrator Amabelle, giving her a separate epigraph after Danticat's own, Danticat concludes the text with an acknowledgement in which she closes by dedicating her voice to those affected by the slaughter: "And the very last words, last on the page but always first in my memory, must be offered to those who died in the Massacre of 1937, to those who survived to testify, and to the constant struggle of those who still toil in the cane fields" (312). Her final words remind the reader of her projects, first to honor the victims, and second, to honor those who still suffer the same inhumane labor conditions as their massacred ancestors. A story out of the not-so-distant past, Amabelle's narrative produces a strikingly urgent need to tell, particularly situated, as it is, by Danticat's acknowledgements and dedication to those continuing to labor in the cane fields. Because Danticat is expressly uninterested in creating a fictionalized "history lesson," she avoids the temptation to choose sides which would, essentially, further re-divide the island. Instead, she gives an insightful view of the material conditions of the transnational victims of the slaughter.

In a more recent discussion of the novel in relation to testimonial fiction, Stephanie Scurto argues that *Farming* defies the Jamesonian purpose of the novel to "resolve, on an imaginary level, the intolerability of a lived dilemma" (59). Instead, she argues, Danticat's novel leaves the reader without a satisfying ending; "Amabelle does

not find Sebastien; she is unable to officially give her testimony; her pilgrimage back to Alegría is disheartening; and in the final scene, she has resolved herself to the river, perhaps to join the bones of her people there as she ‘looks for dawn’ (242, 310)” (59). Yet, Scurto claims, it is precisely this lack of resolution which gives the novel its testimonial purpose. Like Scurto, I argue that the distinctly unresolved nature of the text speaks to the continuing struggle Danticat alludes to in the acknowledgements which conclude her text. As Scurto argues, the final words of the novel honor those whose lives are still governed by the inhumane conditions in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic. As the novel’s impetus, contemporary conditions of exploitation and danger lend a sense of urgency to Danticat’s novel which is common to many works of testimonial fiction.

In drawing attention to the divide on Hispaniola, Danticat is careful to present, in as nuanced a manner as possible, the intricate systems of relations which existed prior to the 1937 massacre. Beginning in the days leading up to the massacre, Danticat’s *Farming* introduces her reader to the daily realities of Haitian-Dominican life. Although these days only comprise a short segment at the beginning of the novel, they provide a sense of the integral understanding of the nature of Haitian immigrant life in the Dominican Republic. Through Amabelle, we see how interconnected Haitian immigrant lives were with the Dominican people. Her narrative provides a sense of the acculturation of Haitian immigrants to life in the Dominican Republic, and the adaptations made to traditional Haitian customs. Although their economic and social standing left them vulnerable in the community, characters such as Amabelle identify the Dominican Republic as home above

Haiti. Danticat's portrait of Haitian-Dominican life conveys both a sense of rootedness and a real understanding of the fragility of their living arrangements. Interdependent as they were, both Dominicans and Haitians alike experienced the trauma of Trujillo's purge.

One of the primary modes of presenting this complex system of relations is Danticat's portrayal of Dominican domestic life in which Amabelle figures as a lifelong domestic servant. Despite the obvious class differences and racial prejudices that separated them, Valencia and Amabelle share an intimate, albeit unilateral, understanding before the massacre forces Amabelle to repatriate. Throughout their interactions, Amabelle demonstrates an acute awareness of the dictums of class; afraid to leave for rum or firewater to ease the señora's pain, Amabelle comments that "anything could happen in [her] absence, the worst of it being if a lady of her stature had to push that child out alone, like a field hand suddenly feeling her labor pains beneath a tent of cane" (7). Narrating this experience, Amabelle draws clear distinctions between the demands of the aristocratic like Valencia—namely attendance during childbirth—and the stark realities of people like herself, field hands and domestic servants. For Amabelle, "all the time [she] had known [Valencia], [they] had always been dangling between being strangers and being friends" (300). There is clear servant/employer divide between Valencia and Amabelle, as well as a clear ethnic divide.

This ethnic divide is reinforced by the distinctions made between servants in Señor Pico's home. Both Juana and Amabelle have had long standing in the house, Juana as a long-time domestic servant and Amabelle as a companion and servant for Señora

Valencia since childhood. In “Memory, Gender, Race, and Class: Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” Nandini Dhar argues that Amabelle, as a black, domestic working woman, has been “appropriated within the familial space;” yet, she does not seem fully incorporated within the family itself (188). Extending beyond Amabelle’s domestic servant role, Dhar suggests that Amabelle’s precarious situation within the familial space of Senora Valencia’s household parallels her uncertain place within the national space of the Dominican Republic (188). Unlike Juana, Amabelle is distanced by race as well as class, an element of the servant-employer relationship that Scurto overlooks in her analysis. Although Scurto addresses the variations in gender roles based on class, her essay neglects the distinctions made between Juana and Amabelle based on a racial hierarchy. As Lynn Chun Ink suggests, “the privileged position of Juana, the Dominican servant, over Amabelle indicates...national ties take primacy over class status” (801). Although Amabelle is a childhood friend and the midwife for her emergency delivery, “Valencia chooses the older Juana over Amabelle to accompany her after her labor...because of their common nationality and because she knows that Pico would approve of her choice for this reason” (801). As Dhar and Ink observe, class and racial dynamics produced a somewhat stable, but always strained position for Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic.

The tenuous place Amabelle and others like her occupied in the Dominican Republic is epitomized in her relationship with Señora Valencia. Although the differences in class and the power relations between employee and employer cannot be overlooked as contributing factors in the familiar, but distant, relationship between

Amabelle and Valencia, their alienation from one another has as much to do with tense racialized relations as class distances. The Señora's treatment of Amabelle is neither malicious nor spiteful, yet her belief in her own racial superiority is clear. Upon the unexpected birth of her daughter, Valencia is startled by the "deep bronze" of her complexion, "somewhere between the colors of tan Brazil nut shells and black salsify" (11). In a startlingly naïve comment, Valencia playfully suggests that perhaps her daughter is "a chameleon" who has "taken her color from the mere sight of [Amabelle's] face" (11). Valencia's misguided use of racialized terms of endearment regarding her daughter's skin color point to the naivety of the Señora's understanding of race relations on the island. She affectionately calls her daughter her "dusky rose" and wonders what will happen if her daughter is ever "mistaken for one of [Amabelle's] people" (12); yet, Valencia fails to recognize the inherently divisive racial hierarchy to which she ascribes. Her words are startling within the context of the novel because they demonstrate precisely the precarious situation in which Amabelle, Sebastien, and the others find themselves.

Alongside the contemporary history of Dominican-Haitian relations, Danticat provides Amabelle with a deep sense of her place within the island's tradition of exploitation and brutality. Amabelle's inheritance of a legacy of dehumanization is represented within the text by the presence of the sugar woman. Acknowledging her participation in the heritage of violent oppression of Haitians, Amabelle describes recurring dreams in which "the sugar woman" appears, once revealing "a shiny silver muzzle," "given to [her] a long time ago" to keep her from eating the sugar cane she was

tasked with cutting (132). This oblique reference to slavery ties Amabelle's narrative to the collective history of Haitians working and living in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The link is solidified as the sugar woman utters "you, my eternity," a phrase Amabelle's mother will repeat to her in a later dream sequence. The sugar woman becomes one of Amabelle's many great-grandmothers, one of the many African-descended women who serve as slaves or domestic servants in the Dominican Republic before Amabelle. Again, Danticat reminds her reader that cane cropping and domestic servitude are deeply entrenched in the historical realities of life in Hispaniola. This long history is striking alongside Danticat's recognition of contemporary cane farmers who continue to be subjected to inhumane conditions in the fields.

Amid this context, Danticat fashions the love story of Amabelle and Sebastien. For Amabelle, the act of narration becomes an outlet for reproducing the healing intimacy she once shared with her fiancée, Sebastien Onius. She envisions her narrative as a space in which she might reunite with Sebastien. Amabelle interweaves abstract dream and memory sequences throughout the otherwise linear narrative as a means of inserting Sebastien into the experience. Amabelle's narrative provides a space to voice childhood traumas, left incompletely healed by the massacre, and new adult trauma, arising from the brutality which separates her from her fiancée. From the beginning, Amabelle tells the reader of her love for Sebastien Onius, and the restorative nature of their relationship.

From the beginning, the novel reads, as testament to Sebastien's presence, its goal, to crystallize some essential quality of his otherwise undocumented existence. From the first line of the novel, Amabelle declaims Sebastien's presence: "His name is

Sebastien Onius” (1). His memory is etched into the opening of the novel, and his role as healer is established. Lover to the psychologically-wounded Amabelle, Sebastien would come “most nights to put an end to [her] nightmare” (1). Without him, life for Amabelle consists of two choices; for her, “it’s either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I’ve become” (2). Through the relationship, Amabelle and Sebastien hope to heal the childhood traumas which orphaned them in the Dominican Republic.¹⁶ Amabelle became an orphan during a tragic border crossing attempt; Sebastien lost his father to a hurricane, and crossed the border into the Dominican Republic looking for work to support his family.

In one of Amabelle’s dream sequences she recounts her parents’ deaths in the river. According to the dream, Amabelle’s parents are caught in the “swelling” current as they attempt to cross back into Dajabón (51). There is little description of their deaths; instead, Amabelle’s narrative focuses on the trauma of the event for her. She recalls that, watching her parents drown in the river, she “scream[s] until [she] can taste blood in [her] throat, until [she] can no longer hear [her] own voice” (52). At the border, Amabelle becomes an orphan. Without family, raised by employers, Amabelle is left alone to process her childhood trauma until she meets Sebastien.

Together, Amabelle and Sebastien “talk to remind each other that [they] are not yet in the slumbering dark, which is an endless death, like a darkened cave” (13).

Although they have witnessed death and suffered losses, Amabelle and Sebastien have

¹⁶ In “At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*”, Heather Hewett applies disability and trauma theory to Danticat’s *Farming*, exploring the intersections between physical and psychological trauma throughout the novel.

found a way to continue living together. Night time and sleep, for Amabelle and Sebastien, are threatening alone, but together, they provide a reminder that death has not come for either of them yet. “Every night Sebastien talks in his sleep,” working through the memory of his father’s death, but Amabelle allows him to speak (67). Through their relationship, they begin to articulate the pain they have experienced. At his prodding, she talks of the kind of people her parents were, which in turn allows him to speak of his father’s death:

If you let yourself,” he says finally, “you can see it before your eyes, a boy carrying his dead father from the road, wobbling, swaying, stumbling under the weight. The boy with the wind in his ears and pieces of the tins roofs that opened the father’s throat blowing around him The boy trying not to drop the father, not crying or screaming like you’d think, but praying that more of the father’s blood will stay in the father’s throat and not go into the muddy ground” (34).

Signaling the difficulty of the memory, Sebastien begins with “if you let yourself” (34). The act of witnessing and bearing witness to his father’s death is traumatic and painful for Sebastien, but it allows him to begin to sleep again. For Amabelle, the relationship serves a similar function until they are separated. Cut short by their separation during the massacre, this healing must be actualized some other way.

In reconstructing her own memories, Amabelle intersperses dream and memory sequences which refigure historical loss, lost parents, and, most centrally, her lost lover. The aging Amabelle uses dream and memory sequences in her text to immortalize her union with Sebastien. As these interruptions become less frequent through the text,

Amabelle describes Sebastien's story as "a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow" (281). Like his story, the Amabelle's narrative is incomplete and fragmentary; a partial representation of a man lost in the massacre. By way of explanation, Amy Novak suggests that "closed, singular narrative structures might settle and pin down the past in ways that hide it" (95). Allowing Sebastien to speak through her dreams and memories, Amabelle testifies to his loss without appropriating his story; she writes, but has resigned herself to the impossibility of telling all of him and his loss. Because Amabelle will never learn the circumstances of Sebastien's life—and death—after his disappearance, her narrative remains open.

Using the dream and memory sequence, Amabelle grants life to Sebastien's memory. For Amabelle, "his absence is [her] shadow; his breath [her] dreams" (281). In the initial and final dream sequences, Amabelle repeats the words "His name is Sebastien Onius" (1). Naming Sebastien, Amabelle ensures that he, as a man with a name, will "never truly die" (282). She claims a space for his experience, for his essence, as she sees it, alongside her own by laying words down in a narrative. It is her return to Sebastien that allows her to move beyond the "living death" she has chosen after her escape (283). She affirms, in the present, Sebastien's name and his right to existence. Amabelle's narrative decisions allow her to eternalize his memory within the novel; because he is no longer present, she must write his name and his memory as a testimony to his life and his suffering.

Amabelle attempts to write Sebastien into her experiences, reuniting her story with his in fiction if not in life. While for readers Amabelle's dream of the sugar woman

indicates a broader historical context for her pain, her treatment of the dream is also indicative of her attempts to insert Sebastien into her narrative. In the dream, Amabelle links the woman to Sebastien, believing he “always brings her here, that she is the hidden image of some jealous woman or the revenant of some dead love he carries with him into [her] arms,” but the woman corrects her, claiming that Amabelle is her “eternity” (133). Amabelle reinterprets the cultural legacy of African slavery on the island of Hispaniola, and inserts Sebastien into that history. Sexual jealousy, in this instance, serves as the mind’s way of incorporating Sebastien into an exclusively female space. Amabelle’s attempt to incorporate Sebastien into her dream, both as an assertion of his place in the tradition of Haitian suffering and as a way of explaining her situation in a less pain-filled way, is indicative of her attempts to recast the trauma she experiences throughout her life.

After narrating the events of the massacre, Amabelle inserts fewer of the dream and memory sequences. As Mireille Rosello notes, “the structure of the text replicates the character’s evolution, her changing relationship to her own dreams and nightmares” (64). For Amabelle, “new dreams seem a waste;” she dreams only of Sebastien (281). As the primary action of the novel progresses toward the present for Amabelle, the dreams disappear because they are no longer framed within the context of the safe nocturnal space created by her exchanges with Sebastien in their nights together. Without Sebastien’s experience, Amabelle has nothing with which to situate her early traumatic experience prior to the massacre. No longer free to dream those painful dreams, Amabelle suppresses their presence in the text. In the final dream sequence, Amabelle decides to “com[e] to [his] waterfall,” the place in which they made love for the first

time, but her waking attempt to find the waterfall fails; she is unable to reunite herself with Sebastien and must turn to writing as a source of healing (283). Alone, Amabelle begins the process of writing her testimony and memorial.

As it engages with notions of historical truth and reconciliation, Danticat's novel participates in the tradition of testimonial fiction. One of the elements which identifies Danticat's novel as participating in the tradition of *testimonio* is the narrator's concern for the "truth" or "veracity" of her story. Caminero-Santangelo discusses the significance of the repeated instances of testimony in the novel. According to Caminero-Santangelo, "literature of historical trauma, like *testimonio*, is notable for its documentary impulse—its efforts to enclose within its fictional narrative concrete references to 'real' historical conditions" (7). Within these texts, "the concern with truth effect frequently takes the form of a reproduction of the very *act* of 'witnessing' within the fictional narrative itself" (Caminero-Santangelo 7). In regard to *Farming*, Caminero-Santangelo notes the "documentary impulse" in the depiction of the makeshift clinic (7). Amabelle's representation of these scenes of direct testimony in the novel compounds the preoccupation with the veracity of her own narrative. Similarly, Rosello highlights the emphasis on the act of testimony in the narrative itself. Rosello argues that Amabelle's compatriots who testify to the emergency courts set up after the massacre are acutely aware of the problematic nature of their testimony. Although they are compelled to speak, the refugees are aware that their testimony, once recorded, may be used to accomplish virtually any ends. Rosello describes these survivors as both "ordinary people and sophisticated witnesses," highlighting their wariness as evidence of the narrative's

preoccupation with truth and veracity (58). Their journey to the courts to be heard is an act of witnessing which occurs alongside the spontaneous witnessing Amabelle records from other members of her refugee group, Doloritas and Tibon, and the broken recitation of Father Romain.

Danticat provides a poignant visual representation of the victims of the slaughter through the refugee group Yves and Amabelle join during their escape. As the refugees approach Yves and Amabelle, she describes them as “the stragglers of a vast family, except for the two women who had coils of pumpkin-colored hair” (171). Including two Dominican sisters, one of whom had been the lover of a Haitian man, the refugee group is comprised of domestic and mill workers from across the island. The group, formed out of necessity, is representative of those affected by the massacre; their experiences combined in this manner are representative of the whole. They are the displaced border-crossers of an island divided. Their experiences come to represent the broad-scale suffering of the short days of *el corte*. By placing non-Haitians in this group of displaced, traumatized persons, Danticat acknowledges the need for an island-wide reconciliation instead of an attempt to heal the Haitian victims exclusively.

Although the novel is primarily concerned with the Haitian cane croppers and immigrants maimed and murdered during the cleanse, it opens the project of reconciliation to members of both nations wounded and lost to the slaughter. To this end, Danticat provides a Dominican counterpart for Amabelle in Doloritas. From her introduction, Doloritas is the bereaved lover. Amabelle meets her as she “muffle[s]” tears which “were silent, almost polite” behind “a man’s handkerchief, embroidered with the

word *Ilè* on each corner” (175). We learn that, like Amabelle, she has lost her lover to the slaughter and makes her way to the river in hope of reunion. Without warning “they came in and took him from [their] bed,” and she learns nothing more of his fate (176). Her Dominican birth and racial identity have done little to protect her from suffering the same traumatic loss Amabelle endures. Both are lovers to Haitian men disappeared in the slaughter.

Doloritas’s ill-fated love is also significant for its border-crossing quality. Together six months, she and Ilestbien were forging a transnational identity. Residents of the Dominican Republic, they both speak Spanish and identify as Dominican, yet before they were separated “Doloritas told him [she] would learn Kreyòl for when [they] visit his family in Haiti” (177). The brutal severing of their relationship is indicative of the traumatic schism forced between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, especially in the areas along the border. In this sense, Dolorita’s narrative, short though it may be, serves a synecdochic role similar to the function of Amabelle’s narrative.

Amabelle continues to layer individual narratives to speak to the collective trauma of the massacre as she recounts Tibon’s narrative. Tibon, another of the survivors she meets, tells stories of Haitian workers rounded up in trucks. Taken to a cliff, Tibon and the others were given the choice to “either jump” or face “a wall of soldiers with bayonets” and a group of “civilians waiting in a circle with machetes” (173). Describing the heaps of bodies in the truck, Tibon tells Danticat that the survivors were left “half dead, not knowing whose blood is whose” (173). Tibon’s testimony collectivizes the victims; their blood becomes indistinguishable. Maimed or slain in the violence, the

victims Tibon remembers are homogenized by their common fate; race, class, and ethnic identity make no difference in Tibon's narrative. Unlike the intensely intimate story Doloritas tells, Tibon's testimony speaks to the death of dozens of people, and to his own wounding. Through Doloritas and Tibon, Amabelle receives models of the two types of testimony she will provide through her own narrative. Weaving these experiences into the narrative, Amabelle situates her suffering and loss as part of the collective trauma.

Merging with Amabelle's narrative, individual experiences prior to the formation of the refugee group are united by their struggle to reach the border. New traumas emerge in the collective setting, compounding the old. As the group flees, they smell the odor of "blood sizzling, of flesh melting to the last bone" in a "bonfire of corpses," victims of the massacre (181). Depicting their stories alongside hers and Sebastien's allows Amabelle to encapsulate the greater horror of the massacre. As they relate the stories that lead to their flight, Amabelle notes that eventually the story-telling stopped because "each person's story did nothing except bring you closer to your own pain" (177). Each tale of suffering becomes yet another means of re-experiencing the horrors they had just barely survived. In claiming this personal connection to each narrative, Amabelle explains her inclusion of their stories within her narrative; their pain is her pain, and hers cannot be resolved without addressing theirs.

Father Romain, left in a fugue state following the massacre, provides another form of testimony. Once a spiritual leader for Haitians living in Alegría, Father Romain is imprisoned during the massacre. In prison, Romain is "beaten badly" and allowed "nothing to drink but his own piss" (261). When Amabelle reunites with him several

months later, Father Romain remains psychologically wounded. During this encounter, he prattles on with the “aimless determination” of a “badly wound machine” (260). Parroting the words his captors, Father Romain bears witness to the dehumanizing rhetoric of *antihaitianismo* to which he was subjected in the prison:

“On this island, walk too far in either direction and people speak a different language,” continued Father Romain with aimless determination. “Our motherland is Spain; theirs is darkest Africa, you understand? They once came here only to cut sugarcane, but now there are more of them than there will ever be to cut, you understand? Our problem is one of dominion. Tell me, does anyone like to have their house flooded with visitors, to the point that the visitors replace their own children? How can a country be ours if we are smaller in numbers than the outsiders? Those of us who love our country are taking measures to keep it our own.” (260)

Through the manifestation of his deep psychological trauma, Father Romain testifies to the massacre by presenting a reportorial account of the systemic cruelty which undergirded the killings. His testimony, driven by an unconscious psychological wound, provides a stark, undiluted account of the atmosphere during the slaughter.

In a striking gesture, Amabelle’s narrative allows Señora Valencia, wife of a Trujillista and former employer to Amabelle, a testimony—of sorts—of her own. As Danticat has done through Doloritas, she again acknowledges the traumatic impact of the Trujillato on the Dominican public. Beginning with the difficult birth of Valencia’s twins and the near-immediate loss of the male child, Amabelle’s narrative provides a glimpse

into the domestic life of a wife of the Republic. That the novel begins with such a scene of Dominican domestic life is significant in Danticat's portrayal of the Dominican aristocratic woman. April Shemak suggests that Valencia, through Papi's depiction, becomes "a symbolic mother of the Dominican nation whose origins and namesake lie in Spain, not Africa;" however, her role in the perpetuation of the white Dominican line is hampered by the death of her first-born son (90). As Valencia becomes merely a vessel in which the next generation of white Dominican men is nurtured, her role as wife to a Trujillista is clearly delineated.

Furthermore, she fails to recognize the deleterious effect such thinking will have within her own familial relations, considering the ethnic diversity of her husband's lineage. Valencia, as the wife of a rising *Trujillista*, is herself a tool for Trujillo's nation-building project. Addressing the antebellum United States, Amy Kaplan argues in "Manifest Domesticity," that notions of the domestic sphere were engineered to complement the nation-building impulse in the public sphere; a similar effect exists within the jingoistic era of the *Trujillato*. Valencia must create the domestic environment that contrasts the violent, nation-building endeavors that Pico undertakes; her home must serve as space of pure *hispanidad*. Kaplan's notion of manifest domesticity, then, elucidates both Valencia's selection of Juana over Amabelle and her contrasting reactions to her own children.

As a commentary on the failure of this nationalist and patriarchal construction of family, Amabelle's treatment of domesticity in the novel is starkly contrasted against

Valencia's understanding of marriage as a necessary step in fulfilling womanhood.¹⁷

Susan Strehle notes, "as the 'sister' who grew up close to Amabelle, Valencia reflects a different route to womanhood than Amabelle can take, and her journey leads to spiritual suffocation" (31). In this manner, Señora Valencia abides by the patriarchal confines of womanhood.¹⁸ While Amabelle chooses a relationship of love over marriage, her Dominican counterpart in the novel chooses a hollow marriage to an absent lieutenant in which her needs are secondary to her duty as wife. Amabelle is concerned with tradition, yet her and Sebastien's displacement from their native culture problematizes their obedience of their customs. Acknowledging a desire for legitimacy, Amabelle admits that she begins to grow increasingly anxious about "being promised in a time-honored way" after Kongo, in the place of Sebastien's parents, comes to ask her to "promise [herself] to him and to keep [herself] just for him" (128, 122). Although Amabelle's desire to be betrothed to Sebastien follows a traditional, patriarchal notion of legitimate love, Amabelle dismisses these notions, "For some, passion is the gift of a ring in a church ceremony, the bearing of children as shared property. For me, it was just a smile I couldn't help, tugging at the sides of my face" (130). The couple is removed from its traditional culture and the extended filial units that would necessitate and facilitate a

¹⁷ In "Naming Sebastien: Celebrating Men in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*," W. Todd Martin presents the women's lovers as foil characters for one another as a means to venerate the characteristics in Sebastien over those of the patriarch Señor Pico. This contrast, although limited to the male lovers, reinforces the notion that Amabelle's relationship is cast as a means of escaping patriarchal oppression.

¹⁸ Strehle expands on Valencia's perfect fulfillment of her role within this patriarchal system in her article "History and the End of Romance: Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*". While Strehle notes that this subplot in the novel serves as a "commentar[y] on the failure of the romance plot," Valencia's failed marriage seems to be a broader commentary on the failure of patriarchal and militaristic structures to provide a stable social environment (36).

formalized courtship and wedding with more rigid restrictions on their behavior; as outsiders, Amabelle and Sebastien are free to choose their spouses rather than accept them as a family arrangement. In this manner, Amabelle escapes the psychological repression that accompanies a marriage like Valencia's.

The contrast between Amabelle's and Valencia's place in their respective relationships is particularly significant as it pertains to their treatment of trauma through romantic relationships. Amabelle does not depend exclusively on Sebastien for strength, but rather, on their relationship, on their shared understanding and mutual strength. Unlike Amabelle and Sebastien who turn to one another for comfort from their individual losses, Señora Valencia and Señor Pico cannot share in their suffering because their marriage is the product of the rigid patriarchal system of the Dominican Republic, "an abrupt union of two strangers" rather than a bond of intimate affection (98). Although the married couple has experienced the shared loss of their male heir, they have "still not grown much closer" (98). As they mourn the death of the child, "[Señor Pico] [is] silent while [Señora Valencia] sob[s], not offering a word" (98). In his silence, Señor Pico upholds the dicta of masculinity imposed upon him by the patriarchal system of the Dominican Republic, yet fails to provide the support his wife relies on to maintain the integrity of their marriage. Presenting a direct critique of their relationship, Amabelle suggests that while Señor Pico may have been "suppressing his own tears," to her, "his silence seem[s] to [her] a failure for [their] marriage" (98). Amabelle also implies an indirect critique of gender roles which are too rigid to allow the couple to heal after their

loss by commenting in her narration and by juxtaposing her relationship with Sebastien to the relationship between her employers.

The inclusion of Valencia's testimony may serve a secondary purpose as well. While the narrative of her life prior to the massacre demonstrates the woman's marginalized role during the Trujillo era, her later testimony to her humanitarian effort during the massacre is complicated by her complicity in the power structures of the regime. Valencia's attempt to save "[Amabelle's] people" during the slaughter reads more as an attempt at self-assuaging than a legitimate rescue attempt (299). In a series of self-congratulatory statements, Valencia lists the people she hid on her property, her face "brighten[ing] with hope" that Amabelle could provide the sense of approval she has longed for since her failure to save Amabelle from the brutality (299). Valencia views her reunion with Amabelle as an opportunity to assuage the guilt she has carried, despite her belief that she "did what [she] could in [her] situation" (299). Of course, a generous reading of her words would acknowledge her physical fragility after a difficult birth, and her responsibility for her days-old children; however, it would be a naïve oversight to ignore her husband's standing within the Trujillato and her relative affluence as well.¹⁹ Valencia tries to regain Amabelle's favor, confessing that she simply "'hid them because [she] couldn't hide [Amabelle]'" (299). She seeks congratulation or recognition, but, as Amabelle notes, "there [were] no medals to be given"; Amabelle desires no heroic deeds committed "in [her] name" (299). Valencia's self-serving desire to save would-be victims

¹⁹ In her "The Trujillato and Testimonial Fiction: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma, and National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," Sandra Cox argues that Valencia substitutes Trujillo as a source of blame, in place of her own complicity (109).

from the massacre stemmed more from her personal attachment to Amabelle than from any motivating concern for human rights.

While we may pity Señora Valencia her distant marriage which crumbles upon the death of the first male heir, it is more difficult to excuse her complicity in the regime which victimizes her childhood friend. Notions of racial superiority aside, Valencia seems to feel at least a personal duty to protect Amabelle or honor her memory, yet her actions are merely a vain attempt at self-consolation. When she fails, she excuses herself by asking what more she could do in her position as the wife of a prominent *Trujillista*. Ultimately, the señora's testimony does little to garner favor from either Amabelle or the reader, particularly as her pleas to Amabelle become less and less about admitting complicity, and more about providing a salve for her wounded pride. One might read Sylvie as Valencia's surrogate Amabelle. "Just a child when the señora borrowed her from the slaughter," Sylvie was of an appropriate age to begin training to be Amabelle's replacement (304). Like Amabelle, Sofie is a young Haitian child, rescued from devastating circumstances and protected in ways Valencia could not protect her own childhood servant-companion. Señora Valencia does seem to feel a motherly attachment to Sylvie, but the timeliness of her rescue, and Valencia's willingness to make a servant of her complicate their relationship.

Despite the horrific consequences of the racially and economically hierarchized social system, Valencia returns to her earlier behaviors, and Sylvie complies. Before she dares speak, Sylvie becomes visibly distraught; she "clear[s] her through several times" and attempts to "temper the audible racing of her breath" (302-3). The thought of asking

a simple question of her employer causes her “upper lip [to sweat]” and “the anxious frown [becomes] more pronounced on her face” (303). Throughout the scene, Sylvie calculates her actions so as to be as unnoticeable as possible, bowing her head and speaking only when prompted by Valencia. Both Valencia and Sylvie have witnessed the brutal end-product of this caste system, yet both revert to the master-servant protocol immediately following the massacre. Amabelle’s statement that Valencia “borrowed” Sylvie from the slaughter is highly suggestive. Sylvie was not protected, rescued, or saved from the brutality; she was “borrowed”. Amabelle’s word choice suggests that, despite her employment at Valencia’s, Sylvie’s safety is tenuous. The threat of immediate death has been replaced by the certainty of exploitation.

Valencia’s statement, ““We lived in a time of massacres... Before Papi died, all he did was listen on his radio to stories of different kinds of... *cortes*, from all over the world. It is a marvel that some of us are still here, to wait and hope to die a natural death,”” powerfully connects the Haitian massacre to other purges of its kind, yet we are left questioning her credibility (300). Although her statement rings ironically true, the reader, informed of Valencia’s family heritage and inherited notions of racial superiority, cannot help but wonder Papi’s purpose for listening to news of so many cleanses. Neither Papi nor Valencia is portrayed as a cruel victimizer, yet Papi’s pride in his ethnic heritage and Valencia’s questionable motives mitigate the impact of this recognition. Valencia may try to insert herself in the narrative of trauma, but her self-congratulatory attitude bars her from unqualified inclusion. Through Valencia’s own testimony, Danticat’s novel

dismisses narratives that simply serve the speaker's desire to identify him/herself with a historically traumatic moment, as though such connection validates his/her existence.

As Amabelle layers various forms of witnessing throughout her own narrative, she creates a polyphonic testament to the atrocities experienced by the massacre's victims. She gives voice to the countless victims of the massacre who survived and escaped to Haiti, but the silence of the dead victims remains ever-present in the novel. Amabelle's search for Sebastien and Mimi serves as a constant reminder that the testimony of those Amabelle finds in Haiti can be only partial. The narrative of her search for Sebastien and Mimi—or at least some trace of their presence—highlights their absence, despite the stories of survival. Although Amabelle turns to narrative as a source of healing, writing is not glorified as a source of complete healing in the novel. Amabelle's failure to reunite with Sebastien in the end remains a palpable source of pain. She has immortalized her memories of Sebastien in fiction, but she has failed to recover Sebastien or Mimi. Returning to his waterfall, Amabelle feels no closer to Sebastien, knows nothing more of what happened to him and to Mimi.

While *Farming* provides snippets of testimony from various witnesses to the 1937 massacre, the novel is perhaps most affecting because it allows national trauma to be represented in one woman's account of the events and aftermath of traumatic loss. *Farming* testifies to the collective trauma of massacre and gives voice to the surviving victims of the slaughter. Yet, the novel is marked by absence. Sebastien and Mimi are gone. Valencia's son and Joël are dead. Countless others remain forever silenced. Their voices can never be recovered. In the end, *Farming* is not a celebration of the power of

narrative; it is not a poster child for testimonial fiction or for *testimonio* itself. Danticat draws on the conventions to forge a memorial to the dead, and a call for a reevaluation of the present. Hers is an “ethical intervention,” calling us to reinterpret the history of Hispaniola in order to envisage a future without exploitation and suffering.

“She could not bring herself to understand how he had been enmeshed in the horror out west; the answer was painfully etched in his violet skin, in his inability to pronounce parsley” (183).

Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*

Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* (2003) is a tri-generational exploration of women’s lives in the Dominican Republic. Following the lives of Graciela, her daughter, Mercedes, and her great-granddaughter, Leila, the novel spans 83 years of Dominican history. *Song of the Water Saints* opens in 1916 during the days of U.S. occupation and ends in 1999 as its characters forge new identities in New York. The novel presents the 1937 Haitian massacre amid an array of oppressive and exploitative historical relations, from the sexual exploitation of Dominican women and children rendered in the 1916 scene until the end of the Trujillo regime in 1961. In Rosario’s depiction of the genocide, she foregrounds two characters in particular—one a Dominican girl, daughter to an absent mother and an adoptive father; the other, a Syrian merchant, owner of the local kiosk. Although an odd pairing and an even odder choice for the focal characters in a representation of October 1937, Mercedes and Mustafá provide a glimpse into the events from a non-Haitian perspective. Rosario voices infrequently considered victims of the brutality of the Trujillo regime. Her characters

speak for themselves, and provide their understanding of the days of the slaughter.

Rosario empowers her characters in this way, allowing them voice without subsuming it herself, speaking of their traumatic suffering without capitalizing on their pain.

Approaching the novel in “Alternative Visions and the Souvenir Collectible in Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*,” Victoria Chevalier examines *Song*’s engagement with the visual, arguing that Rosario’s artistic decisions prevent the sort of voyeuristic gawking into which an audience may easily be tempted by such scenes of suffering as those throughout the novel.²⁰ Chevalier’s discussion of the female characters’ agency in self-expression is also particularly relevant to my reading of the novel. In line with Chevalier, I argue that Rosario combines this preoccupation with representation—the visual and its textual equivalent—with a constant negotiation of her character’s agency, seen through acts of self-interpretation and acts of survival, to revise historical accounts of the Trujillo era. Through a complex examination of silence and speech, witnessing and voyeurism, Rosario interrogates conventional interpretations of the Trujillo period in Dominican history and forces recognition of the continued legacy of massacre on the island. Rosario begins this interrogation by affording the reader a context for her characters’ behaviors and thoughts, not dismissing them as normal, but simply making them understood.

In *Song of the Water Saints*, the massacre figures as a violent eruption of an already balkanized setting. The killings were not the work of one man and an evil

²⁰ Although Chevalier focuses expressly on the two photographs in the novel, and the novelist’s decision to exclude them from the book, the same emphasis on the visual may be extended to her discussions of the 1937 genocide.

dictatorial regime alone; the conditions for genocide predated Trujillo.²¹ Rosario chooses not to spend more paper blaming Trujillo and his regime, but, instead, distributes culpability. *Song of the Water Saints* is not a novel concerned with assuaging guilt or providing the illusion that what happened in 1937 was an isolated incident carried out by a few aberrant individuals. In brief scenes of racial tension or violence, Rosario provides an array of racial—and racist—sentiments throughout the town. The most detailed sketches are of Mustafá and Mercedes, but minor characters in the novel provide balance to the representation. The mother of the child Mercedes beats during Carnival, for instance, is outraged at the attack not for the shocking display of racialized rage, but for the simple fact that she and her family are not Haitian and, thus, are not deserving of such abuse; she exclaims “¡So many other kids in blackface and she attacks mine!” (105). Mercedes’s mother, Graciela, similarly neglects the most horrifying aspect of her daughter’s outburst focusing instead on the masculine aggression her daughter exhibits. Through their reactions, Rosario exposes the pervasiveness of this type of thought; it is not the racism that is abnormal, but the violent outburst in the wrong context.

As a nation of mixed racial heritage, the Dominican Republic negotiates notions of race in particular ways, most notably during the post-Trujillo era. In *Black behind the Ears*, Ginetta B. Candelario notes that “historically, Dominican identities developed in counterpoint to Spain, Haiti, and the United States,” forming an atmosphere in which the people “display their blackness” “as open secrets” (Candelario 257). During the Trujillo era, *hispanidad* and *antihaitianismo* were operational terms for self-identification; the

²¹ The very nature of the killings speaks to this historical reality as well; had the army not anticipated civilian involvement in the massacre, the weapons and methods of murder would not have been selected such that the peasants might take part in the killings.

whiter one could seem, the safer one was. Discussing the oppositional way in which *Dominicanidad* was developed in the early 20th century, Candelario observes that “Dominican identity negotiated the fraught space between Anglo-dominant notions of white patriarchal supremacy that defined Dominicans’ racially mixed heritages as degenerative and their self-positioning as ‘the whites of the land’ in relation to Haiti, who they in turn defined as the antithesis of civilization” (259). The nation of former slaves across the river provided a convenient means through which light-skinned Dominicans could position themselves closer to their Taíno or Spanish heritages. This history of uncomfortable silence around race surfaces throughout Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*.

Race is directly confronted in a number of ways throughout the novel. During Graciela’s developmental years as U.S. troops and businessmen involve the Dominican people in exploitative relationships; during Mercedes’s childhood as the nation is taken over by Trujillo and, later, as the 1937 massacre breaks out in the west; and as Leila and her grandparents adapt to life in the United States. Yet, not once is there an explicit exploration of the family’s racial background. Race and ethnicity become important in Mustafá’s personal history as well. Mustafá identifies himself as the grandson of a “hardworking Syrian who had hailed from the sultans of Spain” (107). Interestingly enough, he does pride himself on his connection to Spain, the very characteristic Trujillo’s cleanse was intended to bring out among the Dominican people. Although Mercedes comes to identify strongly with her *Dominicanidad*, and the superiority of “her royal white blood”, her racial heritage is perhaps not as “white” as she would have

everyone believe (Rosario 162). African, or Haitian, ancestry is a distinct possibility in Graciela's family, as El Viejo Cuco reveals during a conversation. Explaining Graciela's desire to travel—or flee—from her home, El Viejo Cuco reminds her of her “maroon grandpa” from whom she inherits the “hot leg,” the impetus for her urge to leave (46).²² Graciela's racial heritage is never explicitly or fully discussed in the novel; however, the narrative provides the indirect suggestion that she has Haitian or African ancestry. In this sense, the novel parallels the island's uncomfortable silence surrounding racial history and, later, racialized violence.

Within this highly racially stratified society, Graciela and Mercedes are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. As the postcard signals from the beginning, and her relationship with Eli Cavalier will later demonstrate, Graciela is cast, because of her perceived blackness, as a hypersexual being, ready to be taken at will. As Eli sees Graciela, he begins to fantasize about her, comparing her to the series of women he has sexually exploited in the past. Positioning her as an exotic “meal” Eli prefers to the “insipidness” of white women, Graciela's race determines her tragic syphilitic end, and her daughter's increasingly liminal space within Dominican culture (78, 68). When she meets Eli Cavalier on the train, naïve Graciela consents to participate in Eli's fetishistic sexual fantasies. Through this relationship Graciela becomes a prostitute at the brothel Eli frequents, and contracts syphilis from him. Because her mother falls victim to

²² It is significant that Rosario chooses a maroon ancestor for her line of Dominican women. While it denotes Haitian heritage—if we are to believe the stories El Viejo Cuco tells—, it also references a history of slave rebellion. Although maroon groups of escaped slaves existed in many islands throughout the Caribbean, their success in rebelling against slave-owning societies varied. In Haiti, maroons contributed to the overthrow of the French colonial government.

Throughout the novel, Graciela's urge to leave the town is connected to her grandfather's rebellious spirit. With this family history, and Graciela's own intense desire to escape the oppressively small town, her inability to move beyond the constraints of class and race is all the more tragic.

the sexual escapades of Peter West and Eli Cavalier, Mercedes is initially left to the care of her stepfather, and eventually orphaned all together. Rosario humanizes Graciela and Mercedes by depicting both the conditions of their vulnerability and the methods through which they negotiate their vulnerability.

Song of the Water Saints directly engages the tradition of Caribbean testimonial fiction through the historical revision and the re-voicing of the silenced. Although the novel is neither a direct testimonial nor a fictionalized first-person narrative of suffering, it may still be read testimonially because it, like all texts, is “historically situated in power relationships” (Boler 267). The novel, particularly in the 1937 section, reads almost as a collective testimony, designed to give voice to other experiences of the October massacre. Very different from the Danticat novel, *Song of the Water Saints* traces the lives of three generations of women, depicting the massacre as one element of a long sequence of violence and oppression. In the *Meridians* discussion, Rosario claims that when she was writing the 1937 section of her novel, she “really didn’t want to spend too much time on [Trujillo], although he is pervasive in the history” because “he’s gotten enough paper” (Candelario 87-8). Yet, his regime and the massacre committed under his orders exists in an almost central point in the novel, occurring during the early adult life of the central woman in the lineage. While she, like Danticat, spends few words on Trujillo himself, Rosario does allow the focus of her novel to shift momentarily to the atrocities ordered and sanctioned during the oppressive regime. The violence of those October days is figured as one part of a history of trauma and oppression, one facet of the racial tension on the isle of Hispaniola. Yet, her novel cannot ignore the historical

significance of those few weeks in 1937. Unlike Alvarez and—to some extent—Diaz, Rosario turns an unflinching and unapologetic eye to the brutal consequences of racism.

Rosario accomplishes her historical revision in a number of ways throughout the novel, instilling a deceptively simple novel with deep historical and cultural resonance. On one level, Rosario situates the 1937 massacre within a cultural context. The massacre is not unexpected in the novel, as extreme racial tensions and conditions of oppression surface prior to the reports of genocide on the border. As part of this much broader context, she fashions two characters, Mustafá and Mercedes through whose perspectives the reader will come to understand the massacre. Mustafá, for his exotic ethnicity, comes to represent the heterogeneity of the victims of Trujillo's ethnic cleansing as well as the painful silence that surrounds the event. His suffering, though ironic, provides a point of identification for the reader within the text. Mercedes, witness to Mustafá's wounded return, affords Rosario the opportunity to explore other aspects of the era. Through Mercedes, Rosario gives an identity to those who suffered under the brutality of the *Trujillato* and responded through any number of self-preservationist actions. As disturbing as it is, Mercedes's scathing racism appears to be a mechanism of self-defense; denigration of others' "blackness" serves as a way of ensuring her own "whiteness" within Trujillo's campaign of *hispanidad*. Beyond the character-centered narrative, Rosario's text broadens to provide a wide-scale, journalistic account of the events along the border, and in this way, forces the reader to confront the stark reality of the atrocity.

Through the central figure of Mercedes, Rosario explores the silenced voice of the Dominican woman and her place in the atmosphere forged by the *Trujillato*. Tracing her

development from childhood to grandparenthood, Rosario affords Mercedes a full representation. The reader sees Mercedes turn toward violent displays of racist anger during a Carnival celebration soon after Graciela's disappearance and return, her rise to control over Mustafá's kiosk, and her emigration to the United States. A sensitive reader may balk at the brutality Mercedes is capable of unleashing in various scenes throughout the novel, but can, in no way, dismiss her as inhuman or abnormal. Conversely, the reader is prevented from dismissing her as a product of her environment. Circumventing both forms of dismissive response, Rosario provides a figure who is both relatable and distant to our imagination. She exists as an agent within a human environment, affected, but not controlled, by her surroundings.

As a child, Mercedes displays a latent racism which provides another glimpse into the complex relations on the island. During the Carnival celebrations, Graciela discovers her daughter "pounding away at a girl who had come in traditional blackface," "kick[ing] and punch[ing]," all the while chanting "'¡Beat the Haitian, beat the Haitian!'" (103). Mercedes's outburst during Carnival reads as an instance of unbridled rage, perhaps redirected familial anxiety triggered by the sudden return of her mother from her unexplained, prolonged absence. In isolation, this rather disturbing act might simply remain a violent childhood outburst brought on by extenuating family circumstances; however, Mercedes does not curb this racist behavior as she comes into adulthood. The emergence of this attitude so early in Mercedes's life indicates the degree to which Dominican culture, even in the more provincial sections, was racially stratified.

Although this tense environment required the catalyst to erupt, the preconditions for Trujillo's campaign existed.

Intertwined with Mercedes's development of racial consciousness, Rosario creates a character—himself destined to be a victim of the violence—who gains the reader's sympathy by taking Mercedes under his guidance and protection, but simultaneously alarms a cautious reader as he spouts bitter anti-Haitian rhetoric. Upon catching a young Haitian boy stealing food from his stand, Mustafá, a Syrian merchant with "violet skin" (105), admonishes Mercedes to never "behave or compare herself to people like that little boy, ever to act so hungry, so slave-minded, so indolent, so black" (106). Revealing his family's involvement in the political and economic struggle on the island, Mustafá describes Haitians as "animals" "who had, in their twenty-year rule, destroyed the fabric of the country by expelling its best white families" (106). To Mustafá, Haitians are "beasts" who came into his country "with their savage religion and their savage tongue" to "[take] away the honest work from people like his grandfather, a hardworking Syrian who had hailed from the sultans of Spain" (106). His words conflate a notion of ethnic superiority with a sense of unjust dispossession. Racist thought, for Mustafá, is a complex, learned behavior conditioned by historical precedent.

Mustafá displays a shockingly uncharacteristic outburst of racial prejudice, yet his treatment of the young boy is even and fair. He uses physical violence in the moment of capture, but once the boy relinquishes the stolen macaroon, Mustafá releases him. Mustafá's scathing comments do not emerge until after he has sent the boy away with a package of macaroons. Restraining his anger and giving the boy food, Mustafá

demonstrates a sort of temperance; although he despises the boy's "indolent" behavior, he does not blame the child or wish the child physical or psychological harm. His generalized feelings of hatred do not extend to the individual—or at least to this particular individual. The merchant seems to recognize that the circumstances of the boy's life dictate his behavior, and does not hold him individually accountable for his desperation. Mustafá's leniency with the child mitigates some of the shock initially produced by his outburst. Although Rosario allows the reader to condemn his anti-Haitian sentiment, she tempers that reaction through this instance of discretion and mercy. Mustafá deeply believes in a generalized system of racial stratification which places him above the Haitian boy, but he does not allow this belief to be translated into cruelty. Rosario creates this character, who may despise the boy for behaving "so indolent" or "so black", but does not find justification for inflicting pain, as a point of contrast for the young Mercedes. His temperance highlights Mercedes's violence and sets it aside as something atypical; Mercedes's violent rage is not the only possible product of a racialized environment.

During this kiosk scene, Mercedes reacts with pleasure at seeing the boy suffer punishment at Mustafá's hand. Although she is a child when her mentor exposes his own racist views, the earlier Carnival incident refutes any arguments that Mercedes's feelings of racialized hatred stem from that interaction. Signs of Mercedes's developing sense of racial superiority emerge during the incident at Mustafá's kiosk. Mercedes's reaction to the boy's suffering is telling; unlike Mustafá who uses pain only as punishment for the boy's misdeed, Mercedes "[feels] an odd delight at seeing the boy in pain" (107). She

physically reacts to watching him “[become] a rubber doll in Mustafá’s hands;” her “mouth water[s]” and “her fists [tighten]” as though she too is a participant in the boy’s suffering (107). Mercedes “blurt[s]” “do it harder, Mustafá,” as though she is entirely caught up in the voyeuristic pleasure she draws from the boy’s pain (107). Mercedes’s racist views are tied up with an extreme sadistic streak. For Mercedes, watching the boy in pain conjures a feeling of superiority that has previously been denied her; she learns, by observing the boy’s weakness and her relative power—gained by being in Mustafá’s favor—that casting herself as superior to the Haitian boy and all other Haitians affords her a small feeling of security.²³ Preceded by the Carnival outburst, this moment in the novel highlights one of the strategies of adaptation Mercedes begins to use.

Although her adoptive father Casimiro seems to dismiss the Carnival incident as childish acting out, Mercedes does not surrender her anti-Haitian sentiment as an adult. In fact, her racist sentiment does not seem localized in personal experience, but rather in the generalized racist rhetoric that pervaded the time. She exclaims that “the Haitians have been polluting us with their language, their superstitions, their sweat, for too long” but has no justification for these notions (181). For the adult Mercedes, news of the massacre is evidence that God has purged the Dominican Republic of pollution; she believes that “God has His ways of exterminating heathens and their evil ways, and they were not always pretty...As a soldier of God, she accepted the ugliness and necessity of war”

²³ Marion Rohleitner discusses violent *antihaitianismo* as a type of aggression which “offer[s] psychological reassurance and affirmation of the perpetrator’s ‘whiteness’” (199). Rohleitner does not refer specifically to Mercedes in this statement, nor is Mercedes the perpetrator of the Haitian boy’s suffering; yet, her pleasure in the boy’s pain stems from this same self-affirming notion of racial superiority and privilege. In a marginal space herself, Mercedes feels markedly less disenfranchised when she can witness the suffering of a person she has deemed a racially inferior other.

(181). Hers is an internally justified form of hatred, based on the rhetoric that Trujillo circulated during the period. The sadistic inclinations that Mercedes demonstrated as a child have been concretized within a schema of twisted religiosity. In her ability to explain away the massacre as an instance of God's just wrath, Mercedes may seem to serve as synecdoche for particular sections of Dominican society at this time, but her individual sadism and almost hyperbolic fervor prevent her from representing the broader community.

Justified by her religious belief that Haitians are "heathens," Mercedes reacts to the massacre only as a threat to her person. As news filters into the town about the killings, people gather around to listen as Old Man Desiderio delivers "pornographic descriptions" of "the Dajabón" which "ran so red with blood that wild dogs came from miles away to partake in the feast;" of "pregnant women [who] were raped, then disemboweled like cattle;" of the "hundreds of survivors [who] were still huddled in the homes of many a benevolent Dominican" (181). Mercedes reacts to Desiderio's account with revulsion; he speaks of mass murder and unthinkable brutality, yet Mercedes can focus only on the fact of his blackness. Watching him as he speaks, "Mercedes regard[s] Old Man Desiderio's dark skin and broad features with disgust" (182). Despite—or perhaps because of—the possibility of African ancestry in her family, Mercedes observes Desiderio with disdain. She is repulsed by his need to lament these casualties, and callously attempts to silence him with her cruel remark that it is "lucky for [Desiderio] that [his] tongue can taste the 'r' in *parsley*... Otherwise, [his] blood would have blended with the river just as well" (182). As her thoughts turn to the massacre, she thinks not of

the innocent lives lost, but instead “remember[s] the Haitian boy who used to beg at the kiosk...and wonder[s] if he or any of his relatives were clogging up the Dajabón” (182). Mercedes does not feel for the victims of the massacre; instead, she coldly contemplates the possibility of their bodies “clogging up” the river, as inconvenient detritus.

Mercedes’s adult racism coincides with her efforts to survive prior to and under the *Trujillato*. In “Looming Prairies and Blooming Orchids: The Politics of Sex and Race in Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*,” Marion Rohrleitner discusses Mercedes’s complicity in not only the Haitian massacre, but also in the oppression exacted on the Dominican Republic throughout Trujillo’s regime. Rohrleitner argues that unlike Alvarez’s Mirabal sisters, Rosario’s Mercedes is “one of the hundreds of thousands of Dominicans who were quietly complicit with Trujillo’s reign of terror, at least as long as they were not personally affected by the dictator’s whims” (198). Her “fear” is mentioned throughout the novel, but never attributed to a direct cause; instead, the reader is meant to infer that her orphan status leaves her feeling intensely vulnerable. Coming of age during a time when President Horacio Vásquez “turned a blind eye to the true self-cannibalization of the nation” and forging a life during the rise of “Trujillo and all his guns,” Mercedes adapts religion as a method of security and survival (Rosario 160). Already anxious about Trujillo’s rise, Mercedes receives Graciela’s prophecies, brought on by her syphilitic fever. Although no one is quite sure whether to trust her ravings, Graciela warns that “a military man...[is] rising to power, a demon among them who would claim the cloak of God and feed the nation to the wolves” (171). In an economically and socially precarious situation, Mercedes comes to fear not only her

neighbors, but also the rising dictatorial regime. Mercedes, “abandoned by her evil mother and orphaned by her benevolent stepfather” at the time of Trujillo’s rise to power, turns to religion as a means of self-preservation (159).

Merging her newly fervid religious commitment with the sense of security she finds in self-proclaimed racial superiority, Mercedes produces the vituperative rhetoric she spews during the days of massacre. In addition to Anti-Haitianism, Mercedes affects a fervid *Trujillista* persona, placing a “portrait of El Generalísimo Doctor Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, Benefactor de la Patria Nueva” at the entry of the kiosk and erecting an altar featuring a smaller Trujillo portrait (187). Adapting her personal care, Mercedes adds “hair relaxers” and “bleaching creams”—both markers of prosperity and methods of appearing “whiter”—to her beauty regime (188).²⁴ Her complicity in the brutality of Trujillo’s ethnic cleansing and later anti-Haitian policies is a survival tactic. As outspoken as Mercedes is in her views of race, her actions do little more than isolate her from the dangers she could face at the hands of the *Trujillato*. Managing the kiosk, she is insulated from the violence of the massacre, and only after Mustafá’s return from Monte Cristi does she have to face the brutality directly. Given the uncertainty of her own heritage, Mercedes’s impulse to self-protection is perhaps more understandable. Her ideas of racial superiority and her measures to appear “whiter” and more fervently in line with Trujillo’s project are parallel to the actions of those in the *Trujillato* and those who participated directly in the slaughter on the border.

²⁴ Ginetta B. Calendario discusses the significance of hair straightening and styling techniques to Dominican women’s culture in her *Black behind the Ears*. Calendario provides an extensive discussion of hair styling books and the ways in which beauty shops participated in the creation of a white or “Indian” identity for many women.

Alongside the novel's incisive probing into the causes of the massacre, there is a deep sense of loss embedded within Rosario's representation. Beginning with Mercedes's fear for the kiosk, the character-centered narrative soon shifts to the return of a physically and spiritually maimed Mustafá. Upon his return from his vacation in Monte Cristi, Mercedes learns that Mustafá has become a victim of the brutality in the west. Despite the glaring irony that Mustafá is injured during the massacre of the same people for whom he demonstrates such virulent hatred, Rosario refuses to allow the reader to view these circumstances as a satisfying form of divine retribution. To this point, Rosario has cultivated a sense of empathic identification with Mustafá, through his ethical and generous business practices, the loss of his wife, and his tender treatment of the young Mercedita. Especially as his kiosk becomes a place of Trujillo-worship after his death, the reader cannot but register the painful irony. While he is not a blameless victim, Mustafá's suffering reads as an instance of cruel cosmic irony.

Rosario provides brief but poignant descriptions of Mustafá's fragility upon his return. When Mustafá finally returns from his flight to Monte Christi, his eyes are "sunken deeper into his face than Mercedes had ever seen and "there [is] a purple nub where his left hand had been, and the gash on his crown [is] still moist" (182). As Mercedes silences her curiosity to avoid "crush[ing] Mustafá's pride and compromis[ing] her position in the kiosk," she allows shame and guilt to overtake her feelings of empathy (182). As limited by personal motivation as Mercedes's perspective may be, even to her, the lost hand communicates the emotion Mustafá feels upon returning from the site of the massacre. Seeing him upon his return, "Mercedes could see his envy, his happiness, his

anger, his hurt all trembling in the handless arm” (183). Silence engulfs the wound, but the physical absence speaks of the trauma. Mercedes “could not bring herself to ask how he had been enmeshed in the horror out west,” but “the answer was etched in his violet skin, in his inability to pronounce *parsley*” (183). That Mustafá’s suffering is caused by an inability to speak—*properly*, at least—is significant. As the cause of shame-inducing wounds, his malformed *r* and *jota* are the cause of his suffering, and are also linked to the perpetuation of his silence. Although Mercedes’s reticence to ask is in part out of respect for the fragility of his remaining dignity, their silence regarding the traumatic event further reinscribes its horror. His trauma remains unspoken; unacknowledged, it distances Mustafá from his protégé. Represented in the physical wounding of Mustafá, this sense of loss and the psychological ramifications become palpable within the text.

Using the same synecdochic modality Caminero-Santangelo identifies in *Farming*, Rosario allows the silence around Mustafá’s wounding to not only increase the poignancy of this moment, but also to represent the silence surrounding the greater tragedy.²⁵ It remains another open secret among the population, known but not acknowledged. Still harder to acknowledge is the way in which the Trujillo regime turned against its own, against dark-skinned or ethnically other Dominicans during the campaign of *antihaitianismo*. If Mustafá’s mistaken identification as a Haitian immigrant speaks to the homogenization of non-native Spanish-speakers under the Trujillo regime, then his absent hand represents the nation’s traumatic loss of others like him. Mustafá does not fit

²⁵ Citing José Israel Cuello’s *Documentos del Conflicto Dominicano-Haitiano de 1937*, Ernesto Sagás discusses the official silence surrounding the massacre. He argues that “no documentation with direct references to the massacre—before, during, or after it—has been found in Dominican archives” (47).

the model of Trujillo's *hispanidad*; the only characteristics he shares with the massacre's intended victims are his too-dark skin and his inability to trill an *r* or pronounce the *jota*. As testament to those less acknowledged victims of the massacre, Rosario includes Mustafá, a non-Haitian Dominican of otherwise foreign ancestry. He is Dominican by birth, but ethnically Syrian; his cultural identification is neither primarily Dominican nor Haitian. Mustafá allows Rosario to revise the official history of the massacre, in which Haitian "intruders" were the only group affected by the violence. The "purple nub" serves as a visible testament to the border violence; a physical representation of the silenced history. Mustafá's absent limb stands in for the loss the nation suffered that, until recently, has remained largely unacknowledged.

Rosario's representation of Mustafá complicates the historical representation of the massacre victims, but it is perhaps significant that Rosario chooses not to give her reader any extended contact with a Haitian character; after all, the only Haitian identified in the novel is the beggar child who steals from Mustafá's kiosk. Perhaps it is also significant that the most poignant scene in Rosario's treatment of the massacre is the moment in which Mustafá returns from the west bearing wounds presumably suffered during the killings. These facts could be read as evidence that Rosario's novel continues to silence the victims of the tragedy, supplanting their suffering with that of the people indirectly responsible for their deaths. But, I fear that would be too simple a reading. Hers is, after all, a decidedly Dominican novel set not in a border town where most of the violence occurred, but on the outskirts of Santo Domingo. Its emphasis on non-Haitian characters is not an oversight. Attending to Dominican-identified figures, Rosario

exposes the degree to which all those living in Hispaniola were affected by the violence and oppression of the era; in Rosario's novel, the massacre is not simply a Haitian problem and its victims are not only Haitian. To this end, the narrative's report on the events also acknowledges the extent to which the massacre affected Dominican families as well, bluntly informing the reader that "killings happened within Dominican families with Haitian, part-Haitian, or dark-skinned relatives" (181). Rosario's narrative is unflinching in its account of the methods and consequences of the killings. Within a very condensed section, the novel provides a striking account of the horror of the genocide. Like Danticat, Rosario also broadens her depiction of the traumatic repercussions of the massacre by offering not only character perspectives on the events, but also by embedding the killings within the context of decades of trauma and exploitation at the hands of foreign governments and dictatorial regimes.

Throughout the 1937 section of the novel Rosario carefully regulates the exposure her audience receives to the suffering caused by the massacre. In limiting these scenes of inhuman abuse and catastrophic suffering, Rosario avoids two potential problems of testimonial fiction. First, she prevents the reader from the type of self-edifying identification Sundquist cautions against in "Witness without End". Second, as she intertwines the character-focused narrative of Mercedes's experiences with an account of the events of the tragedy writ large, Rosario eliminates the possibility of "passive empathy" by balancing the pathos-inducing character narratives with succinct, journalistic representations of the massacre.

In the novel's 1937 section, the narration and tone alternate between the character-centered story and begins to detail the events of the slaughter, becoming almost reportorial in sections. These interruptions begin with the announcement that Trujillo had come into power in the last seven years. Summing up the events of the past seven years, the text provides a brief report; "El Generalísimo Doctor Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, Benefactor de la Patria y Padre de la Patria Nueva began his thirty-year rule on the heels of the Americans' departure in 1930" (180). Ironically quiet about the details of political corruption and dictatorial oppression, the text informs the reader that Trujillo "had won the election with more votes than there were eligible voters" and that "for the last seven years, many—Mercedes included—feigned devotion toward the man-god whose portrait was required to be hung in every household" (180).²⁶ Rather than expound on the effects of the regime change, the text returns to the seemingly objective statement that "the capital city of Santo Domingo became Ciudad Trujillo" (180). The focus of the narrative has shifted slightly, informing the reader of the historical milieu surrounding Mercedes's story and situating the events that follow in a much broader context. Here, as in other places in the novel, Rosario's narrative makes its most powerful statements through what is left unsaid.²⁷

As the novel turns to the days of the October massacre, it spends very little space recounting the details; yet, there is a sense of urgency and gravity to the telling. None of

²⁶ Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* provides an extended treatment of this phenomenon in the average Dominican household under Trujillo.

²⁷ Discussing the quintessential work of *testimonio*, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, Doris Sommer explores "performative" silence in "Rigoberta's Secrets" (34). She argues that Menchú's silences in the text "[construct] metaleptically the apparent cause of the refusal: our craving to know" (34). Further, she claims that "before she denies us the satisfaction of learning her secrets, we may not be aware of any desire to grasp them" (34).

the central characters in the text are killed, yet the deaths of thousands are mourned in the narrative. The scale of the tragedy is apparent in the narrative, as Rosario opens the section:

the month of October opened with thirty-six hours of carnage in which drunken Dominican soldiers, on orders from Trujillo, took their machetes and built a damn of human bodies in the western Dajabón River. Reports filtered into the kiosk by word of mouth; the news arrived all the quicker with the many terrified Haitians seeking refuge from the horror in a yanquis-owned sugarmill a town away. (181)

The urgency of the narrative increases as it begins to discuss the amassing death toll. The tone in these sections is at once matter-of-fact and emotionally charged. In its bluntness, the narrative presents a stark testament to the atrocities committed. Explaining pieces of the events, the narrative informs the reader that “the army had used machetes so that the Dominican peasantry could spontaneously participate in the massacre” (181). During the slaughter, murderous crowds were indiscriminant and “killings happened within Dominican families with Haitian, part-Haitian, or dark-skinned relatives” (181). The brutality, chaos, and confusion characterized the days of massacre are somberly represented in Rosario’s novel. Confirming historical fact for her reader, the journalistic narrative affords a greater sense of the realities of the massacre.

For a novel as preoccupied with the visual, focusing, as Chevalier notes, on representations and voyeuristic tendencies, *Song of the Water Saints* gives a tellingly sparse account of the violence of the massacre. Writing the 1937 section, Rosario does not lavish ink on overblown descriptions. Instead, the stark horror is plain in the brevity

of the writing. Bluntly stating that “decapitations were commonplace,” the narrative forces the reader to recognize the stark brutality of the incident” (181). The sheer magnitude of the events becomes clear as the narrative testifies to the “the stench of human blood” that “did battle with the air” in the “Haitian-Dominican border towns,” but the effect remains understated in the text itself (181). Unembellished, the words throughout this section carry the weight of the tragedy. As in the scenes of sexual exploitation in which the erotic postcards are described but not shown, the massacre here is described in stark terms, but not provided elaborate visual representation. Chevalier, discussing Rosario’s work as *ekphrasis*, argues that “as a literary figure that focuses on the exchange and circulation between the visual and textual modes of representation, *ekphrasis* functions as a ‘sign of the visual itself, whose production historically has often been put to the service of women’s oppression,’ and, in addition, all those culturally produced as ‘other’” (36). In the scenes of massacre, it is this exploitation of the “other” that Rosario avoids by circumventing the possibility for voyeuristic engagement with the scenes of brutality.

Rosario’s journalistic narration offers blunt statements regarding the events which sharply contrast Old Man Desiderio’s “pornographic descriptions” of “pregnant women [who] were raped, then disemboweled” and other such horrors. There can be no voyeuristic or sadistic enjoyment of these descriptions of massacre; they are too stark, too abrupt. Rosario’s diction cuts incisively to the problem such witnessing narratives may encounter. Labeling Desiderio’s descriptions as pornographic, Rosario echoes Eric Sundquist’s statement regarding the project of Norma Rosen’s *Touching Evil*, that the

wrong kind of testimonial can become disturbingly “seductive, a kind of pornography through which we lose our innocence, whatever the motive or epiphany, time and again” (66). Sundquist also notes the possibility of narcissistic obsession with the study of Holocaust—or, by extension, genocide—narratives as a means through which one might insert oneself into a period of historically significant trauma. Rosario’s hesitance to spend much time on Trujillo or his hold on the nation speaks to a desire to testify bluntly and succinctly without being caught in the sort of obsessive fascination she sees throughout contemporary Dominican political consciousness. While she allows Old Man Desiderio a few of his pornographic descriptions, Rosario casts them almost as a violation of sorts, a gratuitous plea for attention or outrage rather than a significant recording of events.

In conjunction with the journalistic narrative, the silence surrounding Mustafá’s starkly contrasts the descriptions Desiderio offers second-hand of the massacre. Although Rosario allows characters from within the town to gather around Old Man Desiderio at Yunque’s restaurant and Mustafá’s kiosk to listen to his “pornographic,” but generalized, “descriptions” of blood in the streets, the event never resurfaces in the novel (181). Desiderio was neither victim nor direct witness of the violence in the west. His descriptions are graphic, but do not carry the emotional weight that Mustafá’s narrative would. On the subject of Mustafá’s injuries, the reader is left to imagine—or try not to imagine—the cause. Rosario does not provide her readership with what Susan Sontag describes as a “full frontal [view]” of his suffering (71).²⁸ This silence around Mustafá’s

²⁸ In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag explores the ethical implications of photography and photojournalism, particularly in regard to depictions of wartime and genocide victims. Although the essay was prompted by the 9/11 killings, Sontag’s discussion seems appropriate here for the novel’s emphasis on representation and the visual.

wound precludes further exploitation at the hands of the author or of the reader. She preserves the little dignity that remains to him, refusing to allow him to become a spectacle for the perverse edification of the audience.

In the 1937 section of *Song*, Rosario cleverly avoids yet another problem of testimonial fiction—the tendency for excessive character-focused empathy which does little to evoke a change in perception or action. Rosario’s presentation of the facts in this section allows for a type of understanding unavailable through fictionalized, character-centered narrative. The reader’s reaction to these words and the horrors they describe is not conditioned by a sense of identification or sympathy with a protagonist. Addressing the problematic nature of readerly empathy, Megan Boler discusses her students’ reactions to the reading of *MAUS*, a graphic novel which treats a son’s coming to terms with his father’s Holocaust experience:

MAUS is an appropriate representation of the incommensurability of histories and empathy: to read *MAUS* is to walk the border of mesmerizing pleasure, the apotheosis of the pleasure of the text, alongside absolute horror. Empathetic identification is not necessarily with the Holocaust survivor (259).

Although Rosario’s novel involves characters in the tragedy of the massacre, the inclusion of blunt, journalistic segments balances the tendency toward pure “empathetic identification”. Empathy alone is not the goal of Rosario’s chapter.

Rosario’s novel seems particularly concerned with avoiding the phenomenon which Boler describes as “passive empathy” (255). Boler condemns this type of identification for its ultimate inability to move the reader to any action approaching

justice. *Song* provides the empathy-inducing character-centered narrative of Mustafá's wounding and the humanizing character-focused narrative of Mercedes's racism, but also moves away from these characters to force a recognition of the historical realities of survival under the *Trujillato*. In this way, Rosario approaches what Boler describes as a "'historicized ethics' engaged across genres, that radically shifts our self-reflective understanding of power relations" (256). Mere empathy and recognition of past atrocities will not effect change or produce the sort of reconciliation Rosario's narrative seeks. *Song* provides an incisive look into the material circumstances of the Trujillo era in Dominican history, and the power relations which existed within it. Reminding the reader of Mercedes's vulnerability as a peasant and orphan repeatedly throughout the novel, Rosario enables a recognition of the relative powerlessness which undergirds her feelings of ethnic and racial superiority.

As a novel directed at a primarily North American readership, Rosario's text reinforces an international audience of the Haitian massacre, government responsibility, civilian complicity in exchange for survival, and the heterogeneity among the victims. Rosario aims her text at a U.S. readership, but avoids the problematic "double message" Sontag argues that images of genocide generally send to a Western audience (Sontag 71). *Song* does show "a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired," but does not "confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place" (Sontag 71). She humanizes the victims, casting them as victims and victimizers, and removes the voyeuristic stance necessary to see the suffering of another as inherently distinct from one's own. Interrogating the politics of witnessing, Rosario challenges readers to know

the kinds of atrocity that occurred under Trujillo, and to use that knowledge to work toward a greater understanding of contemporary Haitian-Dominican relations.

Through repeated reference to *Yanqui* presence prior to and following Trujillo's regime, Rosario also calls U.S. intervention into question for its ability to overlook dictatorial brutality, directed against the nation-state's own citizens. The Haitian massacre and the suffering of Graciela, Mercedes, and others in the community are not isolated as problems within the island community itself. Rather than isolating these events, Rosario implicates the broader American community for its complicity in the events. Exploring the connections between Hispaniola, the United States, and the Spanish Empire, Marion Rohrleitner's "Looming Prairies and Blooming Orchids: The Politics of Sex and Race in Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*" uses the moments in which U.S. intervention are captured in the novel, specifically, the 1916, 1937, and 1961 chapters. Through Rohrleitner's analysis, it becomes clear that strong implications of U.S. involvement frame the 1937 chapter. Although Rohrleitner draws parallels between Mustafá's racism and developing fears in the United States regarding Dominicans and the spread of HIV, the strongest indictments of U.S. involvement seem to come in the other two chapters she analyzes. In fact, the stark—and historically accurate—absence of U.S. forces during this time highlights the degree to which the U.S. redirected attention from its neoimperialist endeavor during the Trujillo era.

Rosario interrogates the relationship between speaker and listener, exploring the power and vulnerability of the speaker. Because the novel is targeted at a primarily U.S. American readership, Rosario's text is directly concerned with the position of the

audience relative to the stories of suffering contained within it. It is by complicating notions of proximity and distance, guilt and innocence that Rosario hopes to revise the conventional historical record of the Haitian massacre. By expanding the historical record, Rosario tears down misconceptions and provides a new schema for approaching future relations. Her readers cannot cordon off the guilty from the innocent in this novel, and cannot simply dismiss the events as the wretched occurrences of some distant, backward place or time. Instead, we are forced to reckon with the implications of racism, neoimperialism, and genocide; we cannot turn away, and we cannot simply take pleasure in continued awakenings.

“Rigidity means death.”

(Borderlands/ La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa 101)

Conclusions

Given the still-divided nature of the island, earnest recognition of the losses on both sides of the massacre may assist in the process of reconciliation. Serious consideration, in line with that performed by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in post-apartheid South Africa, is needed to reunite the fractured island and to eliminate continued forms of racialized exploitation. In keeping with the project of reconciliation, amelioration, and reinvention, Gloria Anzaldúa suggests that “to survive the Borderlands/ you must live / *sin fronteras*/ be a crossroads” (217). This dissolution of the engineered racial and cultural boundaries between peoples on Hispaniola is vital to a project of self-reinvention.

If, as Richard Turits and others argue, the intense *antihaitianismo* present in the Dominican Republic in 1937 was in fact the direct result of Trujillo’s propagandist nation-building agenda, a reinterpretation of the days of massacre is vital to a reinvention of the island as a safe space for its inhabitants.²⁹ Assuming that a great deal more fluidity and cultural accommodation existed in the borderlands prior to 1937, it is then necessary

²⁹ *Antihaitianismo* persists in the Dominican Republic to this day, the product of what Richard Turits labels “historical amnesia” through which “the pre-massacre frontier world” and “its culturally pluralist nation as well as its transnational community” continue to be elided (635).

to examine the conditions which allowed for a genocidal atrocity like the Haitian massacre, particularly one in which the population was not only complicit, but actively participatory. Finding a means of reversing the lingering effects of Trujillo's campaign is a primary concern for both writers as they publish novels focused on either side of the Dajabón.

As U.S. immigrants, both Danticat and Rosario position themselves as outsiders who speak as a bridge between their island of origin and their new home. The emigrant status of both authors may generate questions surrounding the politics of representation; yet, Danticat and Rosario negotiate the problems of voice and cooptation masterfully in these pieces. While Danticat gives license to a narrator who is herself a writer, Rosario approaches the problem of representation by carefully constructing the reader's vistas into the suffering of her characters. Both writers express concerns regarding their place representing the histories of their home island, but simply cannot allow the silence surrounding the tragedy to remain. Their position somewhere between cultural insiders and outsiders allows them a vision of the island's needs and an avenue of self-expression not available on the island itself.

At the close of *Farming*, Danticat leaves us with a subject without a nation. As Sandra Cox observes, "readers" of Danticat's novel "are left with the image of a subject forged and drifting in the border between two nations, belonging totally to neither" (123). Amabelle's experiences have tied her to both nations; "Amabelle, born in Haiti and raised in the Dominican Republic, speaks Spanish and Kréyol, finds a home in both countries and mourns the loss of loved ones on both sides of the border" (123). "Looking for

dawn” in the river, Amabelle seeks reconciliation in the waters between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, a space of flux, a transitional space rather than a border (310). Stripped of a monolithic concept of national identity—or perhaps granted a sense of *mestiza* identity—Amabelle is left to consider the healing space between divided nations. Danticat leaves her narrator in this aqueous space on the border—the location of her parents’ death and the final destination for so many massacre victims—because Amabelle, and others like her, have no home until the island rift is healed.

There is a similar lack of resolution or healing in Rosario’s *Song*. By the end of the novel, Mercedes has become the grandmother to an emigrant great-granddaughter whose identification with the Dominican Republic is in question. Through its representation of massacre, both the character-centered and journalistic representations, the novel forces recognition of the tragedy, but no resolution is offered. Like Danticat, Rosario complicates the Haitian-Dominican divide which may be so easily and erroneously imposed on an understanding of the massacre. Her narrative voices one previously unheard victim of the violence, complicating the color line in the Dominican Republic. Through Mustafá, Rosario ensures that the reader can no longer view the massacre as a clash between two entirely separate nations.

Although the politics of witnessing pose a series of ethical dilemmas and obligations, Danticat and Rosario both engage the Caribbean tradition of testimony to voice the suffering of the island under Trujillo. Both implicate their readers in the process of healing. For their novels to be effective the reader must be moved beyond the “passive empathy” Boler cautions against; yet, the novelists must also avoid the audience-

gratifying form of pornography Sundquist identifies. In their attempt to balance these demands, Danticat and Rosario succeed in revising the historical record of the massacre; their character-focused narratives generate an emotional response from the reader, but the sense of urgency within these novels motivates the reader to move beyond the feel-good methods of seeing.

Danticat notes in her acknowledgements that the conditions of exploitative labor still exist for the Haitian population in the Dominican Republic still employed by sugar cane mills. Both novels speak urgently of the suffering caused by Trujillo's campaign for racial purity, and both demand reconciliation. Strict political reparations will not suffice in ameliorating the damage caused in 1937. Racial and cultural divisions, demarcated, as Loida Maritza Pérez argues, along lines established by European colonization, must renegotiated in order to restore the reciprocal system of relations. Although seventy-three years have passed since the slaughter, recognition of human loss is necessary to ensure future peace on the island.

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