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Judith Misrahi Barak

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**EXPLORING TRAUMA THROUGH THE MEMORY OF TEXT:  
EDWIDGE DANTICAT LISTENS TO JACQUES STEPHEN ALEXIS, RITA  
DOVE, AND RENÉ PHILOCTÈTE**

*Judith Misrahi-Barak*

*EMMA, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, France*

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These pages were prompted by a teaching experience, and I need to say a few words about it first by way of introduction. A few years ago, I decided to put the collection of short stories by Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* on my postcolonial class syllabus. Among the students who had enrolled in the class was an American exchange student. She was of Haitian descent but had never read Danticat. Nor did she know anything about the massacre of Haitians ordered by Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1891-1961) who had taken power in 1930. Between the second and eighth of October 1937, the Trujillo regime murdered an estimated 20,000 Haitians who had been working for years in the Dominican Republic near the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The student chose to do a presentation on the story to the class and when it was her turn, she explained how she had phoned her mother in order to find out about what had happened in 1937, since she did not know anything about the massacre. I still remember the shivers she sent up our spines, and the quality of the silence that shrouded the whole group. I am sure every student in that class still remembers that moment as vividly as I do. What was so totally heart-rending and so totally exhilarating was the double, or even treble, detour the student had to take to get to her national history: she needed a student exchange experience in France, i.e. the former colonizing country; literature, and finally, another language, English instead of French or the Haitian Creole she may have heard when she was small. By doing so, she was doing exactly what Danticat speaks about in the epilogue to her collection, “Women Like Us”: she was making “the old spirits” live again,<sup>1</sup> she was continuing to weave the web of words and silence that is so central to Haitian culture and at the heart of *Krik? Krak!*, she also kept up the listening and the speaking, going along with the belief that “if you didn’t tell the stories, the sky would fall on your head,” not wanting the

silence to “chop away at your flesh” (*KK* 223).

I would like in this article to foreground some of the questions raised by this experience: the (in)accessibility of trauma for generations who have not lived through the trauma directly but have inherited it from the previous generations;<sup>2</sup> and the *working through* that can only take place through repetition of, and listening to, the *other* text,<sup>3</sup> which may be other writers' texts or, as I will also show, translations. Numerous scholars have published articles and books on Edwidge Danticat's work, laying the emphasis of trauma and *testimonio*, on the body as “a metonym of the Island” and how it becomes a site of memory,<sup>4</sup> on telling and silencing, on how “communities are formed by what they choose to remember as well as what they choose to forget.”<sup>5</sup> I would like to bring into the conversation an element which does not seem to have garnered quite enough interest so far: the way the fictional texts about 1937 have circulated and influenced each other, have been *translated* in the many senses of the word. I would like to show how Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) is at the heart of this process of dissemination. In *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Haitian Memory* (2006), Lucia Suárez insists on “the persistent trauma caused by violence in Haitian and Dominican experience” and suggests that we “consider the *impossibility* of mourning that surfaces from the stories” while keeping in mind that “the process of writing, for the authors, and reading, for us, actualizes the *possibility* of mourning.”<sup>6</sup> Bringing the past into the present is indeed one of the ways of escaping “the prison-house of memory”<sup>7</sup> that is often built in the memorialization of the past. Disseminating it in a multiplicity of texts writes another script, one that is creative in its very multiplicity. If the massacre in 1937 is a historical trauma, Danticat treats it in a personal way, challenging any borders that may have existed between different theoretical conceptions of trauma. I will try to keep the same freedom in my approach.

Dates, names and genres are important here. The first time Danticat publishes a text about the massacre of 1937, she does so using the genre of the short story, “1937,” published in 1991 in the collection *Krik? Krak!* With *The Farming of Bones*, published in 1998, she widens and deepens the scope of her investigation by using the genre of the novel. Danticat quotes two writers in the acknowledgements at the end of *The Farming of Bones*: one is the francophone Haitian writer Jacques Stephen Alexis, the first to write about the ‘Kout Kouto’ or ‘El Corte’ (the cutting), in *Compère Général Soleil* (1955).<sup>8</sup> The other one is Rita Dove, the African-American poet who won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Dove was also the poet Laureate of the United States between 1993 and 1995. The poem she wrote about the 1937 massacre is titled “Parsley” (1983),

in remembrance and honor of the Haitians who were made to pronounce the word *perejil* rolling the R as Dominicans, and were killed if they proved unable to do it.<sup>9</sup> Another francophone Haitian writer, René Philoctète, also wrote about the 1937 massacre in his novel *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* (1989), but is not explicitly acknowledged by Danticat, at least not in *The Farming of Bones*.

One wonders whether the representation of the massacre is hinged on the period in which the writing takes place, on the amount of time that has elapsed after the event, or on other elements such as the national or the diasporic context. It is worth bearing in mind the dates of publication of the short stories, poems and novels that were published about 1937: Alexis writes less than twenty years after the massacre, Dove more than forty years, and Philoctète more than fifty years. Danticat resumes the writing and the talking a few years after Philoctète, and then again, in a second stage, more than sixty years after the events. Alexis and Philoctète write in Haiti, whereas Dove and Danticat write from the distance of the diaspora. One might think at first that the closer one is to the time and place of the trauma, the stronger the representation of it; however, the opposite appears to be true. In fact, it seems the further away one finds oneself in time and space from the trauma, the stronger the shock wave and the more powerful the momentum.

Neither Danticat nor my student have been affected by the massacre directly, they are not direct survivors. And yet, they have had to endure it, live through it. Marianne Hirsch deploys the term “postmemory” to describe “the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first.”<sup>10</sup> How do the second generation, in the case of the Shoah, and the fourth or fifth generation in the case of slavery, abolished over 200 years ago, work through a trauma accessed only through their elders’ memories, photographs or drawings, narratives and silences? Although Hirsch underlines “the specificity of the Holocaust as an exemplary site of postmemory,” she does not restrict the use of the term postmemory to the Shoah, and her reader can feel authorized to borrow it for other traumas, the consequences of which remain visible generations later, or on the contrary remain audible in the very silence that shrouds them. Hirsch’s definition applies also in the case we are interested in here:

Thus postmemory characterizes the experience of those who... have grown up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and

integration. It describes as well the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first—their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents' knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Hirsch insists on the powerfulness of “postmemory” deriving from the fact that it is “mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation” (9). She also refers to Geoffrey Hartman who has written about “witnesses by adoption,”<sup>12</sup> those who adopt the traumatic experiences of others “as experiences one might oneself have had” (10). The whole question seems to be how survivors and their descendants evolve forms that connect past and present, here and there, and “enable a postmemorial working through” (29). It is in that very *connection* that I see part of the *working through* as being possibly enabled, or at least part of the *working* even if it does not lead to a final *through*.

Not only do the fiction writers and research scholars enrich, deepen and respond to each other's work, there is a constant re-examination of the site of historical trauma on the same terms as the revisiting that happens in personal trauma. It is this re-investigation that I want to highlight as a potential source of creativity and not only as a prison. Danticat would not have written “1937” nor *The Farming of Bones* if she hadn't read and been haunted by Alexis's and Philoctète's novels. It is more than simply a question of reference, of literary legacy, or intertextuality. This constant *re-translation* of the trauma into words that have to be *other*, should be considered part of the necessary ongoing and never ending *working through* and the purgation of what Butler calls the “traumatic residue.”<sup>13</sup> There will always be something that cannot be accessed, expressed, understood, transmitted in trauma. Just as in translation there is always something that remains untranslatable. Yet, a re-signifying is possible, although never final, through the re-circulation of the narration of the traumatic (his-) story. Narrativization, constant and repeated narrativization, is essential in this process of endless, creative *translation*.

The *working through* can only take place with the repetition of the narrative of trauma, “through the listening of another.”<sup>14</sup> My student had to listen to Danticat in order to access something she probably already knew, although not consciously. Similarly, Danticat could only write about 1937 because she had listened to Jacques Stephen Alexis, Rita Dove and René Philoctète in the first place. How would it be possible to represent a barbaric massacre such as the one that was organized by General Trujillo and about which so little was known and said for such a long time if one, as a writer, did not operate detours? The *working through* can only take place

by turning its iteration into what Butler calls a “promising instrument,”<sup>15</sup> adding, “There is no purifying language of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous effort it takes to direct the course of its repetition.”<sup>16</sup> I think Danticat’s narrative is precisely situated in the course of that detour and repetition, both in the wake of previous narratives and creating a wake of its own, endlessly chipping away at the “residue” of trauma. I tend to disagree with Suárez when she says: “This constant retelling of a life experience is a form of trauma that traps its victim in a nightmare past, despite the initial goal of telling to heal. [...] [T]he text itself, by its very repetition of abuse, discloses this trap of traumatic memory.”<sup>17</sup> This statement is actually surprising since Suárez’s discourse rather revolves around the possibility to heal from traumatic history by using the genre of fiction to “supplement history” (19).

*The Farming of Bones* begins as Amabelle Désir, a Haitian woman, is working as the maid of the Dominican wife of an army general. Her parents drowned when she was eight, and she was (almost) adopted by the Dominican family. Yet, when rumors of what was transpiring reach her and her fiancé, Sébastien, they have to flee. Many elements of the *story* hark back to Alexis’s and Philoctète’s novels—the love story, the social and political context, the flight, the death of the loved one; even the name of Amabelle *Désir* echoes the name of Hilarius’s and Claire-Heureuse’s son, *Désiré*, pointing to a never finished birthing process. Yet it is through *text* that the revisiting is performed. I will touch upon a few elements of the text that allow such a revisiting and reappropriation to be performed, in relationship to the earlier texts Danticat refers to, leading to a *working through*—narrative frame, time scheme and tempo, narrative voice, and structure of the text.

Let us take a closer look at one aspect of this revisiting and reappropriation, i.e. the narrative framing of the massacre. Chronologically speaking, the first novel introducing references to the massacre is the one by Alexis in 1955 and yet it is not one that is particularly known for its treatment of 1937. Through its depiction of Hilarius Hilarion, a young peasant, the novel covers the whole period of the 1930s and provides an absorbing depiction of Haitian folk life and poverty, of trade union activity, and social and political repression. The reader follows the love and tribulations of the couple Hilarius and Claire-Heureuse. When the shop they are running is destroyed in a fire, they both cross the river into the Dominican Republic and Hilarius becomes a cane-cutter to earn a living. General Trujillo is not mentioned until quite late in the novel, until the events come slowly into the picture, almost unexpectedly:

Josaphat turned around and pointed at the large, color photograph of the generalissimo, Dr. Raphael Leonidas Trujillo y Molina, *Benefactor de la patria, Salvador del pueblo*, and so on. He was decked out like a peacock strutting his colors.<sup>18</sup>

It is only within the last sixty pages of the novel that references to the political situation multiply and become more specific, gathering momentum and speed:

People said that Captain Arismendi Trujillo, the Jackal's own brother, was in flight. He had been part of a conspiracy. The dictator's aged mother had thrown herself at the feet of the raging generalissimo and had drenched his boots with her tears in order to get him to spare her son's life. While sleeping, three colonels had their throats slit by the Jackal's henchmen. Trujillo's police had performed well. He had arranged for the top officers of his army to marry his former mistresses. In this fashion, the wives kept watch over their husbands and denounced them when appropriate. School children organized a demonstration when they got out of class. The army used machine guns, covering the street with some fifty small corpses. (*GSMB* 234)<sup>19</sup>

At the end of the novel, when they are caught in the political turmoil and unleashed violence, the massacre appears as one of the final events that forces the couple to flee back to Haiti. Only towards the end are the political, and linguistic, specificities of the massacre revealed—people would see their lives saved, or not, depending on their abilities to pronounce the word *perejil*:

The guards had run up and confiscated all the machettes. The workers were brutally shoved into a group. They were really in a mousetrap! In a shrill voice, the officer ordered the Dominicans to leave the group. Now, there was nothing to do except to obey without giving the drunken soldiers any excuse to act. They were already behaving in a threatening way and seemed to be taking wild delight in their own brutality. With their rifle butts, they shoved the Dominicans, who regrouped at the side of the road. Accompanied by several soldiers, the officer spoke to them. He had them walk past and pronounce one word, "*perejil*." (*GSMB* 256)

There is no attempt from Alexis to analyze the deep causes at the root of the killing, other than pointing at the utter madness of dictator Trujillo and the fury of the people who carried out his orders. But the denunciation is complete and radical in its very abruptness and shortness: “With the effect of alcohol and the gesture of brutality and violence against the girl, the swine and jackal that took the place of conscience in their fascism was aroused.”<sup>20</sup>

The description of the carnage lasts a couple of pages and ends with: “The silence returned. It was heavy. The rain was falling again.”<sup>21</sup> The violence of the two pages devoted to the description of the carnage is absolute, inserting themselves as they do within the increasing breathlessness of the novel, as if the massacre was the culminating point of all the ordeals Haitians had to go through, all the harrowing experiences of the Haitian people. The novel stops abruptly with the death of Hilarius once the border has been crossed again. The last sentence is: “She was alone” (*GSMB* 290).

A three hundred and fifty page novel and a two-page poem obviously do not speak the same language, and not to the same people, the event described is not framed in the same way, the angles of approach diverge, the energy gathered and spent is different. In Dove’s poem, parsley is very much a dominating image in the poem, and so is the parrot whose feathers are both the same green as the sprigs of parsley and the same red as the blood spilled during the massacre. Again, the framing of the massacre is highly specific. The poem is structured in two parts, one outdoors, “The Cane Fields,” and one indoors, “The Palace.” Yet the weight of language is such that the poem is tied together into an insistent and obsessional bundle of words. Dove’s poem presents a dense whirlpool of images that overpower the reader with its refrains, its repetitions, and its echoes. The two main refrains are given in the first few lines:

There is a Parrot imitating spring  
in the palace, its feathers parsley green.  
Out of the swamp the cane appears  
to haunt us, and we cut it down.<sup>22</sup>

And they are echoed throughout the poem: “like a parrot imitating spring,” “there is a parrot imitating spring,” “out of the swamp the cane appears” are repeated several times, as well as fragments of sentences like: “gnaw their teeth to arrowheads,” “lashed by wind and streaming,” and “lashed by rain and streaming.” Such repetitions and echoes are haunting and keep reverberating in the reader’s mind as they contribute to the shockwave rippling well beyond its origin. They play on the differences between mere echoic memory, which is short-term, and a listening that



has deeper and long-lasting effects.

Philoctète's poetic novel extends the shadows of its visions over Danticat's text. The focus is also brought upon a couple but this time, Pedro Brito is Dominican and Adèle is Haitian and they represent the many ways the two halves of the island cannot be severed. Philoctète concentrates the action on the few days of the massacre itself, so the differences in the framing are again interesting. Yet, the style of the text is such that the general architecture of this eclectic novel, quite unlike any other novel, overrides the restricted time-scheme, creating a high-strung tension in the contradictory movement it generates. If Alexis leans towards social realism, Philoctète dives into the specifically the Haitian literary movement of Spiralism, spearheaded by Frankétienne and represented by Jean-Claude Fignolé and René Philoctète. All three writers had made the choice of staying within the Haitian space during Duvalier's totalitarian regime. Starting in 1965, the re-imagining of the world in the form of a spiral was an artistic, aesthetic, social and political attitude, as well as both an individual and a collective gesture. Providing the image of a deeper connection to the wider universe, the spiral was going beyond Haitians' geographical and political isolation. Kaiama L. Glover explains in a very enlightening way:

Integrally reflective of the process by which organisms and living systems grow and develop, the biological, physical reality of the spiral was as significant to their insular existence as to the wider world from which they were so acutely cut off. It represented a formal testament to the possibility of the infinite.<sup>23</sup>

In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, the spiral informs the writing, which combines unexpected and disturbing images, contradictory and / or paradoxical language, descriptions that are at once brilliant and horrifying, tender and grotesque, funny and tragic. In Glover's words again:

The very idea of the spiral recalls the foundations of the Caribbean oral tradition, according to which stories unfold cumulatively or cyclically; are relatively unconcerned with any purely narrative structure or horizontal, linear development; and are subject invariably to the frequent and spontaneous interventions of the public. The interplay of repetition and deviation at work in the spiral form thus provides a structural point of departure that decisively anchors the Spiralists' fiction in a Haitian geo-cultural

space.<sup>24</sup>

Through the very poetic narration of the love between Pedro and Adèle, the reader is plunged into the threat of the massacre from the very first page, with all its conflicting tensions. Philoctète introduces surrealistic elements such as Adèle's head, which continues to roll, meet people and pass comments, even after it has been severed from her body by a Dominican machete:

No matter how hard Adèle tries to get hold of her head, put it back on, shove it down on her shoulders, nail it, cement it, rivet it to her neck, the head still capers about, bounding over the fence of candelabra cacti into the dust-white street, the main street of Elias Pina, where Don Perez Agustin de Cordoba's house is fidgeting in its bath of whitewash. Feeling whimsical, Adèle's head sticks out its tongue at some children, who've gone back to throwing dust in one another's eyes.<sup>25</sup>

Philoctète also allows the focalization to be done partially through Chicha Calma, the orange *guagua* that drives people around:

Chicha Calma, the orange *guagua* with the pale green hood, gobbles up the rosy air of a Dominican Sunset strongly scented with cane molasses. Sneezes. Clears her throat. I, Chicha Calma, the *guagua* of the border, I carry the cities and villages on my tires. I recognize their particular smells a hundred leagues in any direction (Ouanaminthe smells like café au lait) and can distinguish their individual refrains. From beyond the mountains, plains, valleys, I sense their peace or their distress. The wind, my constant companion, brings me detailed up-to-the-minute reports on their doings. Even the stream crossings sometimes whisper to me stories about the border people that I, Chicha Calma, do not find funny and file permanently away on the spot, being rather reserved by nature.<sup>26</sup>

Until it finally stops at the end of the novel:

Chicha appears to lose her footing, seems borne aloft in triumph, yet her engine can be heard grumbling, snorting, scolding, groaning, as if she were pumping a last jolt of energy from the refugees, who—with piercing cries and eyes popping out of their heads—pile over the border. With their

furniture, tools, saints, smells, songs, legends, their ways of walking, and talking.

Their way of life.

Chicha blows out all four tires, her bolts, her pistons, her tie-rods, her springs, her headlights, her stories. Gasps smokes cracks stops dead terminus!<sup>27</sup>

The author deliberately chooses to go beyond any realistic narration of abomination, claiming victory over horror by wielding wit, poetry and a dark and bright humor.

Compared to *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, *CGS* and “Parsley,” the frame of *The Farming of Bones* is extended so as to go beyond 1937 by two decades, and the whole tempo of the novel is slowed down as a result of this extension of time. Amabelle is twice a survivor: of her parents’ death, and of her fiancé’s and friends’ death during the ‘Kout Kouto’—it is not only the massacre that is traumatic but the emergence out of the trauma: “[...] survival itself [...] can be a crisis.”<sup>28</sup> If Alexis and Philoctète also have one of their protagonists die during the massacre (Hilarion in *CGS*, Adèle in *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*) while the other one survives (Claire-Heureuse, Pedro), in *The Farming of Bones* Amabelle is made to go back to Alegria to visit her former mistress twenty years later, trying to evolve the shadow of a meaning—Danticat wanted to show Amabelle more than simply surviving.

In order to orchestrate this return to the site of trauma, Danticat needed to change the narrative voice and move away from the heterodiegetic (third person) narrative voice that structures the novels by Alexis and Philoctète, in which the focalisation hovers between internal and external. As Rosello remarks, “the protagonist has managed to become the narrator of the tale.”<sup>29</sup> The narrator-focalizer who controls the short story “1937” and the novel *The Farming of Bones*—the daughter of a survivor of the massacre in the former, and a direct survivor in the latter—needed to be granted a voice of her own, since such a narratological choice is instrumental in the construction of a stronger homodiegetic narrative voice, reaching towards an attempted narrative empowerment, what Butler calls “an enabling vulnerability” (2). Such a narratological choice revisits the heterodiegetic voice used by Alexis and Philoctète, and transforms it, literally turning it into another voice, as well as the complex position of the speaker in Dove’s poem “Parsley,” who uses a collective *we*, one among the many Haitians who are suffering but one who is observing too, a poetic historian:

[...] Like a parrot imitating spring,  
 we lie down screaming as rain punches through  
 and we come up green. We cannot speak an R—  
 out of the swamp, the cane appears  
 And then the mountain we call in whispers *Katalina*.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the very structure of *text* reflects, reverberates and re-signifies the mental processes of the *working through*. Again, structure, narrative voice, frame and tempo are closely linked elements that reach out towards a recirculation of meaning. The most striking element of this re-signification is the structure of the novel, the odd chapters being composed of introspective, dream-like or nightmarish passages in bold type and in the present tense, thus highlighting the paradoxical tensions of the *poly-temporality* of trauma, both out of time and requiring a process in time. Trauma being a moment when one cannot be present to oneself, when one cannot take in what is happening at the moment it is happening, it is particularly interesting that Danticat should use the present tense in those chapters, as if suspended in time, in an attempt to process the unprocessable. Chapters 1, 3, 5, 7 etc, until chapter 25, are full of the dreams and shadows that fill Amabelle's life, full of the junctions between her past and her present: "His name is Sebastien. He comes most nights to put an end to my nightmare, the one I have all the time, of my parents drowning" (Chapter 1). Full of the relationship with Sebastian: "In the awakened dark, Sebastien says, if we are not touching, then we must be talking" (Chapters 3, 13). Full of the memory of her parents: "It is a Friday, market day. My mother, my father, and me, we cross into Dajabon, the first Dominican town across the river" (Chapters 9, 50). Full of isolated moments of communion with the natural world: "I am in my room listening for music in the trees, the flame tree pods flapping against each other as the hummingbirds squawk back in fear" (Chapters 17, 94). Those chapters are interspersed in the main diegetic chapters, until the massacre.<sup>31</sup> Chapter 25, which begins with: "The valley's dust storms bring me joy" (139), is the last one of those embedded chapters, made of *text* and not *story*, drilling holes into the diegesis. There is no taking us away from the massacre once it has begun. For over a hundred and twenty pages, only the *story* can unroll, the freedom of *text* has vanished, except for one page, where we find the bold print again, and the present tense of an *over-remembered* past: "In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her" (207). The tempo of the embedded chapters resumes in chapter 37: "The dead season is, for me, one never ending night. I dream all the time of returning to give

my testimony to the river, the waterfall, the justice of the peace, even to the Generalissimo himself. A border is a veil not many people can wear.” (264) The last embedded chapter is chapter 40, the only even chapter, as if the order of things, and their timing, had been permanently altered and thrown off balance:

This past is more like flesh than air; our stories testimonials like the ones never heard by the justice of the peace of the Generalissimo himself.

His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow.

His absence is my shadow; his breath my dreams. (281)

*The Farming of Bones* is the only novel of all the novels I have mentioned here that adopts such a structure and time-scheme, over twenty years for story-time and with such a strong interaction between *story* and *text*, contrary to Philoctète’s highly concentrated prose poem, to Dove’s verse and to Alexis’s realistic novel. This difference that is flaunted to the reader’s eyes is obviously a way for Danticat to revisit her elders’ words while taking them further and chipping away at the “traumatic residue.”

Contemporary writers and scholars have contributed to making the earlier texts more widely read in different countries, bringing the traumatic events forcefully into full view, onto a more global stage. In this respect, Danticat has succeeded in prying the traumatic event from its restricted Haitian context, and it has been my hypothesis that the resulting universalization of the collective awareness can lead to a *working through*. Far from weakening such an awareness, or from leading to a dilution of meaning, it seems to be one more way of spiraling around the eye of the trauma, coming as close as possible, never quite reaching, always almost getting there but never quite. Thinking about how translation functions in the context of Danticat’s novel, and more generally of trauma literature, will take the analysis onto the next stage.

What propels the texts even further and contributes to the *working through* is indeed their *translation*, forwarding the transformative process that has thus been initiated. On a first level, the publishing of Danticat’s fiction about 1937 is probably one of the elements that prompted the publication of the American translation of Alexis’s novel in 1999 by Carrol F. Coates, more than forty years after the original text, under the title of *General Sun, My Brother*. Three years later, Coates collaborated with Danticat on the English translation of the 1959 novel by Alexis, *L’Espace*

*d'un cillement*, and this publication may have contributed to Gallimard republishing the original text in 2011, by way of honoring the writer on the 50th anniversary of his assassination on April 22, 1961.<sup>32</sup> Danticat, walking in Alexis's, Dove's and Philoctète's footsteps, also paved the way for scholars to reexamine the 1937 massacre, in Europe, in Haiti and in the USA, and many historical essays, academic articles and eyewitness accounts began reinvestigating the massacre.<sup>33</sup>

On another level, translators of the earlier texts and of the contemporary ones also participate in this transformative process, disseminating the words of the trauma, same and different, repeated and reactivated, rejuvenated through their iteration in a different context and a different language. The way the different novels written in French or in English migrate to the other language, accompanied by the paratext of still other writers, and translators, contributes to such a dissemination in the public eye. Danticat, coming from a French-Haitian Creole context, having moved to an Anglophone world, writes in English and has her texts re-translated into French, challenging borders once more. In a preface and an introduction, she and Lyonel Trouillot present to the Anglophone world a writer, Philoctète, who, in Trouillot's words, was "almost unknown to non-Haitian 'specialists' in Haitian literature."<sup>34</sup> The translator, Linda Coverdale, takes care to add a "Note on the translation" at the end of the book,<sup>35</sup> telling the reader about the context in which she became aware of Philoctète's novel *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* while she was translating Trouillot's *Rue des Pas-Perdus* (*Street of Lost Footsteps*). Having written an extremely precise and faithful translation, actually quite an amazing one considering the difficulty of the original text, Coverdale feels the need to justify the fact that she had to change the title, passing from "peuple des terres mêlées," literally meaning "the people of the mixed lands" to *Massacre River*, which is historically true but plays more on the symbol of the river while creating a more striking expression. Since "peuple des terres mêlées" inevitably echoes "sang mêlé" (mixed-blood) to a French reader, the title in French means in fact "the mixed-blood people of the mixed lands," which could not quite be conveyed into English through either "mixed," or "mingled," or "jumbled."<sup>36</sup> In his review of Danticat's and Coates's translation of *L'Espace d'un cillement* as *In the Flicker of an Eyelid*, Anthony Hurley emphasizes how valuable it is to have appended material that illuminates the text—letters, prefaces, background information.<sup>37</sup> The translation by Coates of *Compère Général Soleil* as *General Sun, My Brother* is also complemented by an introduction, a note on the translation, a bibliography, a glossary and a guide on Kreyòl pronunciation. Translators and writers translate other writers' and other translators' texts, bringing

about a cross-pollination which is highly creative. The Creole is there too as one more tongue, one more layer, one more text. Danticat herself steps into the translator's shoes when she titles her second collection of short stories *The Dew Breaker* (2004), thus directly referring to, reflecting and commenting on, Jacques Roumain's 1944 novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosée* translated more than thirty years later as *Masters of the Dew* in 1978. This, once again, emphasizes how the *re-reading* and the *translating* endow a text with renewed meaning.<sup>38</sup>

The *working through* is linked to the questions of representation and transmission, the rearticulation, iteration and reverberation of texts that contribute to the endless emptying of "the traumatic residue," leading to a reappropriation and a renewed "linguistic agency."<sup>39</sup> This is what Amabelle is expecting when she hopes she can "reliv[e] the moment often enough" (309). The text does it for her too. More than trauma itself, it is the "enigmatic relation between trauma and survival" that Danticat is interested in, the *beyond* of trauma, the emerging, or not emerging, out of it.<sup>40</sup> It would have been impossible to launch into such an investigation without first the ability to accept the full legacy of trauma, that of exploring it in multiple and diverse ways, and finally without "speaking and listening *from the site of trauma*," departing from it.<sup>41</sup> Amabelle returns to the geographical site of trauma so as to depart. Danticat returns to the literary sites of trauma so as to depart. The process is a dynamic one, creating through movement in space, time and text the necessary leeway for transformation. Only then can meaning circulate again. In translation as in fiction, reducing the distance is often what is at stake. Coming as close as possible to dissolving, in the chemical sense of the term, the "traumatic residue," enables the writer, the characters and the community of readers to re-signify, in a creative way. Only then can a narrative of impossibility be transformed into one of possibility, or rather of possibilities since the text ceases to be written in the singular and becomes multi-voiced instead, shared by many, now part of our collective consciousness.

## Notes

I want to thank the Department of French and Italian, and the Department of English at Emory University, where a shorter version of this paper was presented in October 2012. This version attempts to echo some of the reactions, comments and conversations that emerged after the talk. My thanks go to Professors Deepika Bahri, Geoffrey Bennington, Abdul JanMohamed, Valérie Loichot, Elissa Marder, Claire Nouvet, particularly, as well as to the graduate students of these two departments. Earlier on, Professors Yolaine Parisot (University of Rennes 2, France) and Candace Ward (Florida State University,

USA) had also offered useful insights while this article was in its early stages. I am also indebted to Pr Bella Brodzki whose ground-breaking *Can These Bones Live?* had a long-lasting impact on me, before I had fully grasped the deep implications of what translation could be. Following up on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (1923), Pr Bella Brodzki demonstrates in a masterly way how translation can be "a life-sustaining act, a life-empowering moment shared between two generations in an ongoing process of carrying the past into the present" (4).

<sup>1</sup> Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, 223. Subsequent citations to *Krik? Krak!* are to this edition and are cited in-text as *KK*.

<sup>2</sup> See Hirsch "Past Lives," and "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory."

<sup>3</sup> See Butler, *Excitable Speech – A Politics of the Performative*. See also Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

<sup>4</sup> Shemak, "Re-Membering Hispaniola," 98.

<sup>5</sup> Francis, "Unsilencing the Past," 169. See also in the final bibliography titles by Marta Caminero-Santangelo, Myriam Chancy, Sandra Cox, Michael Dash, Martin Munro, Pamela Rader, Mireille Rosello, Stephanie Scurto, Renée Shea, April Shemak, Lucia Suárez, Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, among others. One can also refer to the special issue of *The Journal of Haitian Studies* on Edwidge Danticat, edited by Claudine Michel.

<sup>6</sup> Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola*, 8, emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> The translation into English by Carrol F. Coates was published in 1999 under the title *General Sun, My Brother*. More details about the translations will follow.

<sup>9</sup> The epigraph to the novel is a quote from the Bible that refers to the battle between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites, the former obliging the latter to pronounce the word *Shibboleth* and killing them if they could not do it in the same way as them (Judges, 12 :4-6). As Francis reminds us, "language as a tool of national or ethnic discrimination is not a modern or secular phenomenon," ("Unsilencing the Past," 173).

I thank Geoffrey Bennington for directing my attention to *Shibboleth – Pour Paul Celan*, where Jacques Derrida defines the shibboleth as the right of passage, in truth, the right to live ("le droit de passage, en vérité le droit à la vie," 12). As suggested in conversation (October 29, 2012), Derrida's analysis of the *date* is also enlightening in the context of this article: it is unrepeatable ("irrépétable," 13), but it can be transcribed, exported, deported, expropriated, reappropriated, repeated in its absolute singularity ("transcrite, exportée, déportée, expropriée, réappropriée, répétée dans sa singularité absolue," 18).

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, "Surviving Images," 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



- <sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), quoted in Hirsch (2001): 10.
- <sup>13</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 38.
- <sup>14</sup> Caruth, *Trauma*, 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 38.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>17</sup> Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola*, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> Coates, trans., *General Sun, My Brother*, 219. Future citations to *General Sun, My Brother* are to this edition and are cited in-text as *GSMB*. “Josaphat se retourna et lui désigna au fond de la pharmacie une grande photo en couleurs où le généralissimo doctor Raphael Leonidas Trujillo, Y Molina, *Benefactor de la patria, Salvador del pueblo* et la suite, chamarré comme un paon, faisait la roue.” (Alexis, *Compère*, 264)
- <sup>19</sup> “On disait que le capitaine Arismendi Trujillo, le propre frère du chacal, était en fuite. Il avait conspiré. La vieille mère du dictateur s’était jetée aux pieds du généralissime fou de rage et avait aspergé ses bottes de larmes pour obtenir la vie sauve de son fils. Trois colonels avaient été égorgés dans leurs lits par les sbires du Chacal. La police de Trujillo était bien faite. Il faisait épouser aux gradés les plus importants de son armée ses anciennes maîtresses. Ainsi, c’étaient les femmes qui surveillaient les maris, et les dénonçaient au besoin. Des enfants, au sortir de l’école, avaient manifesté. L’armée avait tiré à la mitrailleuse, allongeant une cinquantaine de petits cadavres dans la rue” (Alexis, *Compère*, 282). Elissa Marder remarked on how such a description is reminiscent of yet another massacre, the 1848 revolution as described by Gustave Flaubert in *L’Education Sentimentale* (conversation, October 29, 2012). Victims of blind violence in different countries and eras are put on the same plane. Alexis’s text brings Flaubert into resonance, just as Danticat brings Alexis’s text into resonance. For readers interested in the revisiting process, one may add that Epaminondas, a character in Alexis’s novel, is also a character in Flaubert’s *Salambo*, as well as the child hero of Sara Cone Bryant’s story “Epaminondas and his Auntie” situated in the American South (1907), and the eponymous hero of Frédéric Marcellin’s *Thémistocle Épaminondas Labasterre*, considered as the first Haitian novel (1901).
- <sup>20</sup> Coates, *General Sun*, 257. “Après l’alcool, la mise en train de quelques brutalités, leur lubricité excitée avait tout à fait réveillé en eux l’hybride de cochon et de chacal que le fascisme leur avait donné en guise de conscience” (Alexis, *Compère*, 310).
- <sup>21</sup> Coates, *General Sun*, 259. “Le silence revint, pesant. La pluie avait recommencé à tomber” (Alexis, *Compère*, 312).
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=172128> accessed November 27, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Glover, *Haiti Unbound*, viii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>25</sup> Coverdale, trans., *Massacre River*, 163. “Adèle a beau vouloir reprendre sa tête, la placer sur son cou, l’enfoncer dans son cou, la clouer, cimenter, river dans son cou, la tête cabriole, saute par-dessus l’enclos de candélabres, gagne la rue blanche, la rue principale d’Elias don Agustin de Cortoba. Et la tête, un rien excentrique, tire la langue aux enfants qui recommencent à se jeter de la poussière dans les yeux.” Philoctète, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, 108.

<sup>26</sup> Coverdale, *Massacre River*, 95. “Chicha Calma, la guagua orange au capot vert pâle, bouffe l’air rose du couchant dominicain fortement parfumé à la mélasse de canne. Eternue. Toussote. Moi, Chicha Calma, la guagua de la frontière, je porte les villes et les villages dans mes pneus. Je reconnais leurs odeurs particulières à cent lieues à la ronde (Ouanaminthe sent le café au lait) et distingue leurs refrains les uns d’avec les autres. Par-delà les montagnes, les plaines, les vallées, je perçois leur paix ou leur détresse. Le vent, mon compagnon de toujours, me fait, seconde par seconde, un rapport détaillé sur leur emploi du temps. Même les passes-d’eau me chuchotent parfois sur le compte des gens de la frontière des histoires que je ne trouve pas drôles et que je classe illico, moi Chicha Calma,—étant de nature réservée.” (Philoctète, *Peuple*, 58-59)

<sup>27</sup> Coverdale, *Massacre River*, 210.

“Chicha paraît perdre pied, semble portée en triomphe. Pourtant, on entend son moteur qui rouspète, ronfle, gronde, grogne, comme si elle était en train de pomper une dernière énergie aux réfugiés qui, les yeux exorbités, les voix criardes, traversent la frontière. Avec leurs meubles, leurs outils, leurs saints, leurs odeurs, leurs démarches, leurs chansons, leurs légendes, leur parler.

Leurs us et coutumes.

Chicha crève de ses quatre roues, de ses boulons, de ses pistons, de ses bielles, de ses histoires, de ses ressorts, de ses phares. Pantèle fume craque stoppe net terminus!” (Philoctète, *Peuple*, 145).

<sup>28</sup> Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Rosello, “Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” 56.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=172128> accessed November 27, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Mireille Rosello has also commented on the alternance between odd and even chapters, saying that “the story (...) takes over for several chapters,” see “Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*: Traumatic Memories and the Translucent Narrator,” 64.

<sup>32</sup> Coates and Danticat, trans., *In the Flicker of an Eyelid*, 2002. See also Michael Dash, “Edwidge Danticat and her Haitian Precursors,” in Martin Munro and Dany Laferrière, eds. *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader’s Guide*, 26-38.

- <sup>33</sup> See in the final bibliography titles by Accilien, Adams, Méléance & Ulrick, and by Derby & Turits.
- <sup>34</sup> Trouillot, Introduction to Philoctète, *Massacre River*, 14.
- <sup>35</sup> Coverdale, *Massacre River*, 217-220.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-220.
- <sup>37</sup> Hurley, “Translating Jacques Stephen Alexis,” 189-196.
- <sup>38</sup> Although there is no space here to integrate the analysis of Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the novel still has to be mentioned since it is an additional instance of the echo resonating in a demultiplied way. Diaz’s treatment of 1937 would not have been possible without Alexis, Philoctète, Dove and Danticat before him. The novel narrates the life of Oscar Wao, and that of quite a few of his relatives and friends. But apart from foregrounding the Dominican community living in the US through scathing humor, vitriolic irony and blistering sarcasms, and on top of being extremely funny, Diaz’s novel also summons back the memory, and the erasure, of the 1930s Trujillo’s dictatorship. To do so, Diaz uses the particular device of the footnote. The reader is getting involved with Oscar and his problems when, stealthily, a footnote mentions Trujillo—“Although not essential to our tale, per se...” Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 90. The footnotes will slowly move center stage and displace what used to be shifted off stage. How close to the trauma should / can we come? It is another detour, another way of problematizing closeness and distance. For a comparison of the novels by Diaz and Danticat, see Cox.
- <sup>39</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 2.
- <sup>40</sup> Caruth, *Explorations in Memory*, 9.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

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