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WEARING THE *VEIL* OF THE BORDER: VISIONS OF HAITI AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *THE FARMING OF BONES*

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My paper intends to be a reflection on how the negotiation of Haiti's border with the Dominican Republic has impacted on its geopolitical and ethnic identity. This paper is part of a wider study of the impact that the *interculturations* within and 'beyond' the 'Caribbean' have on the islands' identity formation, which is the general concern of my thesis. Here I will focus on the specific use of metaphors of the 'border' in the novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) by Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat. I will prove how the novel offers both symbolic and real 'border crossings' to reassess the myth of Haiti's strong and secure collective sense of identity, which is part and parcel of the heavy 'ethnicisation' the island has experienced on an international scale. In this paper, I will refer to *ethnicization* as the floating signifier Dominicans have come to associate with the very word 'Haitian', a kind of "label of misconduct, improper behaviour"¹ as Lauren Derby describes it, which involves the metonymic use of the racial stigmatization for more complex linguistic, cultural, economic and class-based tensions existing between the two halves of the island of Hispaniola. Moving from Edwidge Danticat's assertion: "My people are vulnerable: not able to live behind high walls"², I will explore some of the possible meanings of the term 'vulnerable' in the trajectory the author suggests from the precariousness of Haitian

lives to the possible use of *vulnerability* as a critical response to ultra nationalist discourses.

Haiti's history has been marked by its watershed act of defiance: its self-declaration as the first Black Republic in 1804, acquired through the overthrowing of the French slaveholding regime. As C.L.R. James points out, Caribbean people "first became aware of themselves as a people in the Haitian Revolution".³ On the other hand, Haiti's very act of rejection of Western tutelage has resulted in its isolation not only from Europe but also from the rest of the Caribbean, to which Haiti's model of emancipation seemed dangerous and aggressive, therefore simply not commendable. Since then the island earned the label of "the neighbour that nobody wants".⁴

The historical treatment of Haiti on an international scale is one more proof of the weight and use of 'ethnicity' on a political level. Ethnicity has been one of the 'borders' that have denied Haiti the possibility to live independence at its fullest; borders aimed at defending the West from what Chomsky has called "the threat of the good example" that the island has represented.

Borders that, in fact, stood for the West's rejection of the social and political questions brought about by the island's revolutionary antislavery struggle. The 'ethnification' of Haiti has developed along the somewhat forced image of its strong and seamless collective identity, which has been reinforced by authoritative affirmations like George Lamming's: "It is a curious irony that the poorest of all Caribbean territories is also the richest and most secure in its collective sense of identity. There is no Caribbean island where this is stronger or more *authentic*" (my emphasis added)⁵.

In my view, what Danticat does in *The Farming of Bones* is to scratch the surface of the above common understanding of Haiti's myth of 'authenticity' in order to find what lays often untouched and unrecorded underneath.

Despite the border being the ideal metaphor to describe the *la Hispaniola* – the name Columbus chose to 'baptise' the island on his arrival - the histories of its two countries have always mixed and interconnected, due to several historical events: the alternating European powers, the Haitian attempts at conquering its neighbour, the reciprocal effects that one's dictatorial regime have had on the other's and finally the almost syncretic US occupation of the two countries – Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and the

Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. As Dominican author Loita Maritza Perez argues, “Hispaniola’s tangled history has formed us”⁶ referring to both Dominican and Haitian writers that have tried to explore the island’s complexities and its coexistence of opposites. These very complexities make up the privileged landscape for Danticat’s fictional world, since, as she often reminds her readers “My people have a complexity and I want to write about that”⁷

These issues are made more pertinent by Danticat’s very positioning. Born in Port-au-Prince, in 1969, at the height of Duvalier⁸ dictatorship, Danticat migrated to the United States at the age of twelve and there she has lived ever since. Despite French being her mother tongue together with the (oral) Haitian Kréyole, Danticat decided to write in English, her ‘stepmother tongue’ – as she defines it - a neutral language, giving out perhaps her intention to address more to the Haitian community in the Diaspora than to the local francophone and creolophone Haitians.

The Farming of Bones sets the two halves of the island – Haiti and Dominican Republic - as the two edges of a line of racial discourse: a strong ethnicisation, as experienced by Haiti, versus an at least apparent deracialised social consciousness as developed on the Dominican soil. Danticat reflects on these two myths from a ‘border’ perspective which encompasses and includes both, and which represents the ‘third space’ of her Anglophone US positioning. In order to reassess this ethnic stigmatization of Haiti as the most ‘African’ among the Caribbean islands, Danticat sets to reveal *not* the joy of the *borderland*, but rather the tensions and frictions grounding the specific hybrid space of the border.

The Farming of Bones is based on an historical horror story: the slaughter of about 30.000 Haitian cane cutters on the banks of the Massacre River, which marks the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which was ordered by Dominican dictator Rafaél Léonida Trujillo in 1937. The two protagonists, Amabelle and her lover Sebastien, are two Haitian labourers who find themselves caught in the massacre. While Sebastien cuts cane, Amabelle is a housekeeper for Señora Valencia and her husband General Pico, who is supremely devoted to Trujillo. Amabelle is the voice that tells the story of her small personal world smashed by military mayhem, while at the same time trying to elaborate the pain and to survive it.

After the massacre has destroyed the man she loves and many other beloved, leaving her desperate for memories, recollections and reconciliation, Amabelle affirms: “A border is a *veil* not many people can wear”⁹

This metaphor refers to the veil as an ornament one can take off in private places, which does not really *contain* one’s identity, in the sense that it does not enclose it nor restrains it in ‘borders’. That is why Amabelle thinks that not everyone is privileged enough to ‘wear the veil’. Those who wear it have somehow been given the chance to switch, to move, to trespass and stay alive, or, which is more important, to ‘feel’ alive, whole in themselves. Haitians have never been allowed to ‘wear’ the veil of the border as weightless and imperceptible, because of their heavy heritage of poverty and racial stigmatization which have made their crossings unwelcome.

However, as we will see, the characters in Danticat’s novel *do* attempt to wear the veil. Despite the violence of Trujillo’s army, they constantly cross the river risking their lives to face an equally uncertain future, compromising yet never giving up on their ‘humanity’ and pride.

The recurrent reference to bones in the novel, indeed, is a metaphor for Haitians’ last bulwark of humanity in a world that denies them the very basic demands for that humanity.

As its title suggests, in fact, the cane life in the novel is ‘the farming of bones’, a macabre image that hints both at the exhaustion experienced by the cutters, and at the high rate of deaths among them during the harvest season. The act of cane cutting is a “farming of the bones” because after a day in the heat of the fields, brushing up against the sharp edges of the cane, the workers find their skin is shredded, and their bones closer to the surface than the day before.

The novel is scattered with images of corporeal violence that explore the extremely vulnerable status of Haitians on the Dominican border. They are the people that don’t belong anywhere, the “wayfarers” (p.55), those who learn to live and love in the most precarious way, as if their fate were naturally doomed by the fluidity of the border, symbolised by the tides of the Massacre river that so many has swallowed in its insights.

On a symbolic level, the bodies of Haitians are dismembered with machetes because of the nationality they represent, one that needs to be 'contained'. After being beaten by the guards at the border, Amabelle's body is "a marred testament", her flesh "a map of scars and bruises" (p.227) like the very valley where the massacre has taken place .

In *The Farming of Bones*, Danticat plays the precariousness of Haitian lives off against the dangerous nature of Dominican national identity. Whereas Haiti had originally offered a transnational narrative of racial equality that aimed at the end of slavery throughout the Caribbean (from which the renaming of all Haitians as 'blacks' after the Independence and the abolition of slavery in 1805), one century later Dominican dictator Trujillo had constructed a nationalistic project on 'the myth of the Indian' which dismissed both blackness and racial hybridity.

The mentality which effectively produced this sense of nationhood is evident in *the Farming of Bones* in the reaction of Senora Valencia to her daughter Rosalinda's skin colour. She tells Amabelle: "My daughter is a *chameleon*. She's taken your colour from the mere sight of your face" (p.11 My emphasis) There is a sense that Valencia has accepted her dark daughter, but in a way usually associated with Dominican racial politics. She describes her children as "my Spanish prince and my Indian princess"(p.29), which clearly echoes the dominant cultural identity in the Dominican Republic.

This form of cultural syncretism defined as *Indigenismo* – 'Indigenism' - obliterates the contribution of people of African origins to the construction of *Dominicanness*, while at the same time working side by side with the valorisation of the Hispanic cultural and ethnic heritage, which has been used as the main justification for Dominicans' intolerant attitude towards Haitians.

As Sibylle Fischer points out in her recent *Modernity Disavowed*, Trujillo fostered its people's identification with the aboriginal inhabitants of the Hispaniola, the Taino Indians, as an attempt to offer Dominicans a lineage that was reassuring and more preferable than the Africanness of their neighbours¹⁰.

Therefore, by celebrating and 'resuscitating' *el indio dominicano* – the Dominican Indian - Indigenism foregrounded *Hispanism* and it was not in contradiction with it. It created a discourse that lifted the blame of slaughter from Spain and, eventually,

allowed the ‘mother country’ to maintain the leading role within the Dominican imaginary. At the same time, it created the necessary narrative that suppressed any reference to the revolutionary antislavery and to the drive towards modernity that Haiti represented¹¹. This is just an example of how Haitians’ racial traits have been used to build a mythology of ‘difference’ to support the Dominican nationalistic discourse at the expense of the internationalist project of its neighbour.

As we have seen, Danticat exemplifies Dominicans’ constant preoccupation with the singularity of race through Valencia’s reaction at the birth of her two twins, born with different racial features. Despite defining both as ‘Indios’, therefore skipping over their racial identification, Valencia betrays a typical Dominican attitude when she asks Amabelle: “Do you think my daughter will always be the colour she is now?”(...) “my poor love what if she is mistaken for one of your people?” (p.12)

This question foreshadows the massacre that is about to take place at the border, when, indeed, dark-skinned Dominicans ‘mistaken’ for Haitians are killed. Rosalinda’s ‘otherness’ is made even more explicit by Doctor Javier’s remark that “{she} has a little charcoal behind her ears”, for which Valencia’s father blames her husband’s family.

The reference to the ‘little charcoal’ behind Rosalinda’s ear is interesting as Danticat seems to be playing with the title of a poem by Dominican Juan Antonio Alix, “El Negro tras de la Oreja” (the black behind the Ear). This poem mocks the preoccupation of the light-skinned Dominican elite for asserting their whiteness, affirming that these concerns had no place in the Dominican land, where “a little black behind one’s ear” is –“a la moda” – fashionable¹².

Danticat interestingly displaces the context of this literary reference, making ‘the little charcoal’ behind Rosalinda’s ear one more reason for Valencia’s racial concern.

Through this short reference, Danticat introduces the ‘real’ racial discourse creeping under the supposed Dominican *melting pot*, where a little blackness is ‘fashionable’, provided it is contained within the borders of ‘whiteness’.

Besides that, the birth of the twins lends itself to another level of signification, as the birth of the twin nations within la Hispaniola. Valencia’s son, the light-skinned Rafi, becomes the symbol of the Dominican Republic, whereas the chameleon Rosalinda represents Haiti. as April Shamak explains, Rafi’s unexpected death and Rosalinda’s

survival turn the Dominican nationalist mythology on its head, also proving the singular origin of the two countries, symbolically erasing their border. For this reason, Valencia needs to “contain the racial excess produced from her own body, imposing the nationalist rhetoric onto her children”¹³ precisely identifying them as “my Spanish Prince and my Indian Princess”.

Another expression of Haitians’ fluidity is to be found in their use of a language specifically forged and shaped in the border region. The logics behind the massacre was Trujillo’s assumption that Kréyole speaking Haitians would never be able to master the Spanish language, and therefore could not pronounce the trilled “R”, nor the jota. Consequently, the day of the massacre his men asked anyone with dark skin to identify a sprig of parsley, calling it with the Spanish word ‘perejil’. That Trujillo chose language and not race as the yardstick by which to measure the Dominicaness seems a silent admittance of the impossibility to ‘draw the line’ between the two peoples on the basis of appearance.

However, the border region proves him that blurred and subtle differences exist also between the way Haitians and Dominicans use their language. Amabelle, for example, speaks a form of ‘creolised’ French interspersed with Spanish words (“Ay, pobrecita manman mwen” - My poor mum! - p. 25), and she is able to understand Senora Valencia’s Spanish. She admits to herself that, despite valuing the importance of even the simple uttering of the Kreyole ‘pési’ against the imposed Spanish equivalent ‘perejil’, she does not know how to say it ‘properly’ in either way. When a woman travelling with her through the border dies uttering ‘pési’ in Kréyol, Amabelle recognises it as “a provocation, a challenge, a dare” and she reacts against Trujillo saying “To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more” (p.203).

At this stage in the novel, Amabelle is stuck in a physical as well as linguistic *impasse*, signified by her inability to pronounce ‘parsley’ in one way or another. Her hybridity is not a light veil to wear, since she is forced to choose where to stand, therefore she chooses silence. She admits that, when the rumours of the massacre had begun to spread, she was unwilling to believe them, as she had not realised she had to choose between dying claiming her Haitian identity or surviving passing for a Dominican. Therefore, she was unable to ‘wear the veil’ and move to the other side of the border.

At the end of the novel, a much older Amabelle returns to the border after twenty years, to put her previous life of servitude and dependency into a new perspective. She had previously believed that ‘one single word could have saved all our lives’ (p.264), although she was convinced that she would be spared the torture of choosing between *pési* and *perejil*. Similarly, she had confided until few minutes before fleeing the plantation that Senora Valencia would stand on her side to reward her for her loyalty and affection, regardless her husband’s ultra-nationalist views. By the time she comes back to Alegria, Amabelle knows that “a single word could not save us” from the dictator’s anger, as “many more would have to and many more will”(p265). In the same way the bestowing of an official status to the ‘Indios’ had not saved the thousands Tainos killed by the Spanish. Both massacres *had* to happen for the national ideology to survive. Ethnic otherness had to be obliterated for a sense of Dominican identity to emerge and feel safe.

Amabelle seems aware of the fact that no word can save her because a word cannot bestow an identity. Language is a tool and the massacre has proven it to be as deceiving and blurred as skin colour. Danticat herself admits she undergoes a double translation in her writing:

I always think of the translation as a retranslation anyway because I am transferring an image in my head onto the page. Add to this the fact that my native language is not the one I am writing in and you also have another kind of translation. It is always a challenge, but personally I love it.¹⁴

Finally, the experience of the massacre proves Amabelle that neither saying ‘perejil’ with the right Spanish accent nor ‘passing’ for a Dominican would serve the Haitian struggle for survival. Amabelle’s reflection broadly encompasses the fragility of human beings unable to build ‘high walls’ to defend themselves, those whose fate is to be carried away by the river tides, those who are made as pawns and victims of history. “Breath, like glass is always in danger” (p.283) Danticat reminds us. Danger of the sudden intrusion of history, against which one can build neither borders nor high walls. The Haitian experience teaches us to see the contradictions that need to be negotiated between identity and history on an intimate level. On a more theoretical

level, it also brings us to interrogate more on the use of ethnicity as justification for nationalist discourses

I would like to conclude with a quotation from Danticat's interview with Marie-Helene Laforest, Haitian writer and my former professor at the University of Naples, Italy:

I think we are all prisoners of history; whether we like it or not. We can not free ourselves from history while being ignorant of it. Many of us think that we migrate, go to another country...but we are simply stepping into another place's history"¹⁵

Let us consider how many people have so far stepped into Haiti's history (The French and the British, the Spanish, the Dominicans later and recently the *yanquis*¹⁶), and how much of Haitian history, with its original antislavery project stretching beyond its 'borders', has affected other people's history. Surely so far this has created the conditions for a heavy ethnicization, which my paper has tried to address. However, as *The Farming of Bones* has shown, there is always the possibility for a counter-discourse: a conscious, although painful, movement across borders of languages and races, through which Haitians, both across the Dominican border like Amabelle and in the Diaspora like Danticat herself, have reclaimed the 'veil' of their 'hybrid' subjectivity.

Notes

¹ Derby, Lauren, "Haitians, Magic and Money: *Raza* and Society in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands, 1900 to 1937", p.493.

² "Island Memories", *The Guardian*, November, 11, 2004.

³ CLR James, *The Black Jacobins*, Allison & Busby Ltd, London, 190, p. 391

⁴ Samuele P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order", 1996.

⁵ Quoted in Anthea Morrison, "The Caribbeanness of Haiti" in *Francophone Caribbean Today*, Gertrud Aub-Buscher and Beverly Ormerod Noakes eds, University of the West Indies Press, Mona, Jamaica, 2003.

⁶ "Voices from Hispaniola", special section of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 2004 vol. 5 n.1, pp.69-91 Smith College, p89.

⁷ *The Guardian* interview, *Ibid* , p.4.

⁸ Francois Duvalier:, President of Haiti between 1957 and 1971. Doctor, politician, dictator - Born in 1907 in Port-au-Prince, Duvalier was a medical doctor who became a leading figure in a group espousing a black nationalist ideology in the late 1930s and 1940s. Explaining Haitian history in terms of racial struggle, Duvalier claimed the time had come for a black middle class to bring an end to the traditional supremacy of the mulatto elite. On his death in 1971, his 19 year old son Jean-Claude was proclaimed “president for life” .

⁹ Danticat, Edwidge, *The Farming of Bones*, Abacus, NY, 199, p. 364. All quotations will be referred to in the body of the text.

¹⁰ Fischer, Sibylle, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* , Duke University press, London, 2004.

¹¹ See Fischer, p. 155-168.

¹² The following extract of the poem is very indicative of the role and the ‘use’ of blackness in the Dominican ethnic identity: “*El que se crea preocupado/que se largue allá a la Habana/ Que en tierra dominicana/no le da buen resultado. Y el biscochuelo lustrado/ aunque sea con miel de abeja/no de motivo de queja/que todo esto es tontería/pues esta a la moda hoy día/el negro tras de la oreja*”.

¹³ Shemak, April, “Re-membling Hispaniola : Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones* , *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 48, n.1 Spring 2002, p.91.

¹⁴ Edwidge Danticat in “Voices from Hispaniola”, *Ibid*, p.69.

¹⁵ Laforest, Mariehelène, “A new Tongue has sprung: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat”, *Anglistica*, vol.3, n.1, 1999, p.226..

¹⁶ This is the Haitian term for Americans from the US.

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