

Killing Joy: The Racial Politics of Happiness and Love in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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Abstract: In this article, I examine how happiness and love become an affective politics that mediates the migration experience in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*. I propose that the efforts to speak and write about issues of space and location evokes powerful affects that polarize bodies and push them to move. Drawing on the scholarship of Sara Ahmed and Chela Sandoval, the article counterposes the xenophobic "happiness" of the Dominican family/nation against the decolonial love that the novel's liminal protagonist, Amabelle Desir, articulates from a Hispaniolan borderspace where Black lives, stories, and histories matter.

Key words: Race/ethnicity – Displacement – Affect/emotion – Haiti – Dominican Republic.

In September of 2013, the Dominican Republic's Constitutional Tribunal Court made the decision to revoke the citizenship of Juliana Deguis Pierre, a Dominican woman of Haitian descent (Danticat 2015).¹ This decision created a precedent to strip the citizenship of all other children of Haitian migrants who have been integral to the economic history of the Dominican Republic since the beginning of the twentieth century. These same subjects are now labeled as persons "in transit," with a policy that reaches as far back as 1929. According to the 2015 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report, this particular *Sentencia* and its implementation represent "a situation of statelessness of a magnitude never before seen in the Americas" (4). The policy relegates migrants to a type of political and legal limbo, suddenly considered foreigners by the law and unable to return to Haiti—a country in which many have never set foot. Moreover, many of these migrants do not consider themselves Haitians, as they were born and/or have resided in the Dominican Republic for generations. This contemporary legislation was supported by a history of racial

¹ For more details see: www.refworld.org/es/pdfid/5d7fcd99a.pdf.

discourse that falsely constructs Haitians as racially “other” and potential contaminants of Dominican national identity.

From this historical and political perspective, the present article will focus on the 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones*, by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, to show how the effort to speak and write about nation and displacement also requires a reflection on space and bodies and the ways in which emotions become impressed upon them. It is through these categories that Danticat’s novel highlights the ways in which we understand nationality and family as sites for a contested politics of happiness, love, and national imaginaries. Therefore, Danticat’s reflection on the 1937 massacre at the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic supplies us with the tools to think citizenship and belonging otherwise, that is, beyond a love for the nation or the happiness it may promise. The protagonist Amabelle Desir, a Dominican woman of Haitian descent, evokes an oppositional desire for connection directed toward the excluded Haitian other and the intimate memories of her ancestors, thus questioning traditional Dominican definitions of “home” that have been imposed upon her. I will argue that this movement away from official nationalist narratives redefines the space of belonging as the intimate, yet violent, space of the border. More specifically, Danticat’s novel makes apparent that the borderspace must be resignified as a site in which difference can be embraced as a form of resistance, effectively disarticulating entrenched nationalisms on both sides of the divide.²

I therefore propose a reading of *The Farming of Bones* through a study of two very different discourses that give shape to the novel. The first of these discourses attends to the promise of happiness as a collective and external experience, made by the Dominican state and family, in which bodies left outside of national discourse are simultaneously made uncomfortable, violated, and abused. The second discourse is the desire of the wayfarer for a space from which an oppositional mode of consciousness can be articulated. Stemming from a romantic love between two Black Haitian bodies, this desire

2 Much work has been done in terms of recognizing the shared space between both nations. Notably, the Transnational Hispaniola Collective has played an integral role in working to overcome simplistic Haitian/Dominican binaries, and complicates and enriches the arguments of my article in its transnational approach to understanding Amabelle’s proposed position of radical love. The goals of this Collective are to reimagine “the island” as a whole, something that represents an important step in the telling of radical and liberating narratives. Their Facebook group and nascent website outlines the critical interventions they hope to see in the field of Haitian and Dominican Studies: “[We] seek to transform dominant paradigms in Dominican and Haitian knowledge production, political systems, and pedagogy that perpetuate social exclusion on the basis of ethnicity, class, gender, citizenship, sexuality, language, and ability.” Their edited volume, the culmination of a series of conferences, labeled Transnational Hispaniola combats facile debates on Dominican and Haitian relations in order to defy the “nationalisms, xenophobia, exceptionalisms and racist idealizations of Dominicans and Haitians that promote conflict and exclusion and silence moments of commonalities and solidarity” (249). It is precisely these exceptionalisms, nationalisms, and idealizations of Hispaniola that I set out to dispel, and that I underscore in the following analysis.

becomes a metaphor for memory and lost connections beyond geopolitical boundaries. The intimate space is a response to the rejection of Haitian bodies from a “promised happiness” that the officially imagined family/nation propagates. Ultimately, I demonstrate the ways in which Danticat’s novel illuminates a praxis of decolonial love and radical Relation to repair those bodies fragmented and broken by the fixity of the modern nation-state. I contend that by focusing on the *happiness* that bars Amabelle from her nations and *love* that connects her to her past, Danticat’s novel offers a revolutionary vision of connection—one that is found within the fragmented nature of the past, sutured together by a deep recognition of humanity and a radical orientation toward difference.

Emotional Ways of Knowing in Transnational Hispaniola

Recently, feminist and queer studies scholarship has opened arguments of racialized national imaginations, and their incorporation or rejection of certain bodies, to intimate spaces and relationships, such as the family house and romantic/sexual unions (Ramirez 2019; Horn 2014; Chancy 2012; Decena 2011). These studies seek to open up the realm of the intimate in order to theorize racial, gender, and sexual (counter-)imaginings of the nation. In this way, sexual desire, pleasure, and spiritual yearnings become deeply political metaphors that bring to the surface historically silenced stories of dispossession and liberation. I seek to build on these bodies of scholarship by focusing on the narration of Amabelle’s migration experience and the emotionally charged landscape that unfolds along her journey—specifically the relationship that she forges not only with her fiancé, but also with her Dominican family.

Among these emotions are love and happiness, often two driving forces of migration. Likewise, there are many official discourses and personal stories that employ these emotions in order to represent a land of promise for the ones who risk it all. After all, national economies stimulate migration in order to obtain a labor force that is thought to be easily controlled—a fantasy that drives Amabelle’s parents to their death. Nevertheless, in many studies on Dominican and Haitian conflicts, scholars have generally ignored how Haitian migration has also been emotionally impressed in such a way as to accentuate a national love for the Dominican Republic and the constructed Dominican identity (García-Peña 2016; Fumagalli 2015; Chancey 2012; Shemak 2011; Munro 2006; Suárez 2006; Martínez-San Miguel 2003). In the works cited here, the authors all take on racial injustice and systemic white supremacy in the Dominican Republic, however, none directly cite a politics of happiness and love as a locus of critical discourse. I do not claim that none have taken up an affective critique of these relations, but rather that there exists a gap in “thinking” how happiness and love work politically—especially in terms of the novel in question—to mark the boundaries between the racial(ized) bodies of Hispaniola.

For example, in his study of trauma and memory in *The Farming of Bones* Martin Munro examines how the novel presents the effects of felt trauma on the individual and

the community. Moreover, he demonstrates how Danticat, through her novel, identifies “what is destroyed by trauma and also indicates the new structures and sensibilities that emerge from the traumatic or posttraumatic condition” (84). While the author centers Amabelle’s narrative as one that collects residual emotional trauma to create an archive of lost history, his focus is on the testimonial act itself: “To the childless Amabelle, the traumatic memory becomes something to mother, protect, and keep alive — she wants to “find a place to lay it down... a safe nest” for it (266) — but is also a burden to be borne, to be suffered and endured” (91). As Munro concludes, Danticat’s Amabelle tirelessly recuperates and attempts to pass on histories and traumas, but comes to the realization that these pieces do not fit together seamlessly—her history is one that is characterized by incoherence and thus must be understood through its fragmented nature, that “burden to be suffered.” But the question remains: what is the deeper yearning that drives Amabelle to suffer such a burden?

In a similar manner, Lucía Suárez addresses Danticat’s novel in *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*. Here, she “set[s] out to find ways in which literature intervenes constructively against a landscape of death, loss, and violence which the island of Hispaniola and its diaspora have inherited,” (8) and to demonstrate how literature acts as “an agent that intervenes in society beyond the strict realm of aesthetic acts” (184). Specifically, Suárez explores how *The Farming of Bones* as a form of trauma literature “provides an opportunity for victims to testify...about abuses they suffered” (80). She claims that Danticat’s novel returns a history and voice to Haitians and Dominicans that corrupt leaders on both sides of the island have stolen from them. Again, this type of analysis stems from a locus of trauma and witnessing in order to ask how we can take the stories on the page to better understand extratextual life—that is, how we might take seriously the experiences of those who inhabit the “underside of modernity” and make space for the knowledge that these experiences produce.

The questions that this article proposes, then, builds from these conclusions—guided by decolonial feminisms and women of color feminist philosophy—to ask: what might, perhaps, make the protagonist *feel a sense* of wholeness beyond the fragmentary nature of her history that others have so often highlighted? What is the underlying desire or yearning (as M. Jacqui Alexander might write) that drives movement throughout the text? How does this yearning illuminate other possible ways of inhabiting the world and connection across difference? And, how can we engage emotional discourses in the text as modes of knowledge production in their own right?

Barred from Happiness, Looking for Love

The Farming of Bones tells the story of Haitian-born Amabelle, who narrates her life and relationship with the Valencia family both during and after the Parsley Massacre of 1937. This event is known by many Dominicans as *el corte* or the *Perejil* Massacre, the killing of an estimated 20,000 dark-skinned Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent. This

massacre was a consolidation of Trujillo's national attempt at whitening the nation and his work to establish a clear border with Haiti (Derby 10). At a young age, Amabelle's family was pushed to cross this same border in order to find work to sustain themselves. Tragically, her mother and father drowned in the river and Amabelle was adopted in the Dominican Republic by a wealthy family in the town of Alegría. She describes this family as one that is boastful of their "pure Spanish blood" and whose societal position stems from the ability to trace their ancestry directly to Spain (Danticat 18). The story also narrates Amabelle's relationship with a Haitian cane worker named Sebastien, the brief time that they share together, and the violence that quickly overtakes their lives—separating them through the silence of her lover's disappearance. These experiences push Amabelle to Haiti and back again, where she is abused at the border by the Dominican army, loses her imagined bond with her Dominican family, feels estranged from her native land, and ultimately immerses herself in the very waters that claimed the lives of her parents.

At the beginning of the novel, Amabelle occupies an uncomfortable, but seemingly "happy" position within her adoptive family. She feels close to her "sister," Señora Valencia, and even assists in the birth of her twins. Although she is barred from eating at her own family's table, Amabelle is seen as an integral piece in the family machine that keeps the household together. Her relationship with her adoptive sister, Señora Valencia, is a friendship interrupted by Amabelle's duties as housekeeper. Amabelle is at once a member and servant of her Dominican home; she is "like family," but is subject to the conditions that her Dominican family establishes. For example, when taking up residency with the Valencia family, Amabelle is pushed aside, given orders as if she were a maid, and even told to return to Haiti by guests. After assisting in the birth of her twin "siblings," the doctor comments to her: "Let me also say this to you. You should leave here and become a midwife in Haiti" (21). She physically responds to this comment by twisting her face into a grimace "that might be interpreted as a smile" (21). The inability for the doctor to understand this "compliment" as a subtle moment of violence physically affects Amabelle. The racialized comment makes salient the border that she must constantly navigate within the household, and further removes Amabelle's body and history from the comfortable space that she must pretend to occupy. This moment is interrupted by "tears of joy" from Señora Valencia who, surrounded by her true family, looks forward to a new future, leaving Amabelle to feign her own full-hearted happiness for them.

Throughout the first section of the novel, Amabelle is conscious of her precarious position as outsider within, however these feelings of unhappiness are alleviated by secret meetings with Sebastien under the cover of nightfall. During these secret visits, the lovers share memories of Haiti, deceased parents, and imagine a future together in a place of their own: "In the awakened dark, Sebastien says, if we are not touching, then we must be talking. We must talk to remind each other that we are not yet in the slumbering dark, which is an endless death, like a darkened cave" (13). It is the shared knowledge of

connection and moments of flesh-made-one as their skin touches that stave off the “endless death” of forgetting. In this intimate space, Amabelle imaginatively flees the confines of the Valencia family’s home and opens a new sensual space with her fiancé. She mediates on the wholeness that she feels here—it is when she brushes her skin against that of her Haitian lover or deeply connects with him through “talk” that her present reality is erased and the fragmentation of her past fades. For the two lovers, “talking” is a way of holding space for the other to be vulnerable, when for so long such a vulnerability would perhaps run contrary to the national project unfolding outside of their embrace. What is more, Amabelle is free in this space to express a true joy, one that is not tethered to the well-being of her adoptive family: “His fingers slice the air towards me. Before his hands land on either side of my waist, I’m already squealing and cackling like a sick hen, already feeling as if I’m being tickled” (14). The unfettered joy of the moment is starkly juxtaposed to the stoic happiness (that “grimace that might be interpreted as a smile”) that must be simulated in the Valencia’s home. With Sebastien, Amabelle experiences a different joy that brings not only faded memories of lost parents, but one that frees her body to feel on her own terms and react without restriction.

One could argue that this love provides a space that “breaks through” the uncomfortable and unhappy positionality of Amabelle within the guarded walls of her adoptive family. As Jennifer Harford Vargas demonstrates, these particular moments are registered on the formal level of the text, as they are narrated in a “prose vignette style marked by bold-face font” (1155). These sections of the novel break up the linear narration and are spaces that concentrate more on feelings than information that moves the text forward (Harford Vargas 1155). However, these moments of love do more than break up the linear narration to aesthetically comment on the fragmentary nature of Haitian history in the Dominican Republic. They also work to open a space of possibility in which a different type of love oriented toward bodies that share a history of dispossession are able to imagine a life otherwise. This is to say, Amabelle disrupts the happy orientation toward a love of her Dominican family to instead love on her own terms—an act that pushes her to defy the limited and limiting position that her Dominican family has defined for her. This type of emotional approach, then, goes beyond trauma analysis to propose an-other way of inhabiting the world—one that rests on defiant love oriented toward the bodies of the historically dispossessed. An emotional analysis expands our understandings of memory, recovery, and offers a new view of spaces otherwise—it becomes a tool for survival and resistance, shaping our knowing of historical reality and how we produce knowledge. The testimony follows.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed analyzes how emotions function as tools to impress certain bodies according to their position within the officially imagined nation and, in this way, reinforce or adjust a sense of belonging. Specifically, happiness and love are two concepts that Ahmed analyzes in terms of the impressions left by movement toward a promised familial ideal and the creation of a *sense* of “national character” (134). Happiness, in a political sense, is about the way in which certain societies

are organized around some bodies and not others: “The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations. In wishing for happiness, we wish to be associated with happiness, which means to be associated with its associations” (Ahmed 2010a 2). Thus, Ahmed demonstrates how the state of happiness comes to be associated with those bodies who are able to make the “right” associations, the “objects of happiness” toward which individuals being to direct themselves. In constructing the Dominican family/nation as an object of happiness, threatened by foreign bodies, the official subject must align itself with the nation to avoid falling outside of those associations that lead to a “happy” state. As we have seen, the happiness that Amabelle’s family feels as they bring new life into the world is an emotion that Amabelle cannot fully reciprocate, for she is pushed to the outer limits of familial belonging and even made to imitate joy in order to preserve her space in the family house.

Likewise, Ahmed defines national love as the ways in which various bodies are affected by and move toward the nation. Narratives of national love work by configuring the national subject as one that is under threat or endangered by imagined others (Ahmed 2004, 120). It is precisely this national love/hate that is invoked in official nationalist narratives of the Dominican Republic. The nationalist fantasy is to create a community in which those who appear as if they do not share the same Hispanic origins, sound as if their first language were not Spanish, or practice the Catholic religion are constituted as the silent invaders, whose sole purpose is to dilute and overthrow the mythical *mestizo* race of Dominicans. The official narrative is employed to move Others away from the national ideal of *dominicanidad*. Amabelle is only able to remember her Haitian family when sharing space with Sebastien. This oppositional love that opens a gap to think about the past pushes against official happiness and national love oriented toward the Dominican Republic and redirects intimacy and connection toward another dark migrant body, one that has also experienced the violence of displacement and rejection from both island nations.

Thus, in a society that has historically evoked “Haitianness” (read: Blackness) as a sign of hatred and fear, threatening the loving orientation toward a Hispanic nation, *loving Blackness* may function as a type of decolonial political stance within official “unhappy” narratives. That is, oppositional love disrupts the exclusionary politics of a “happy love” oriented toward the nation and official national subjects. Chela Sandoval has called this emotional orientation “decolonial love” and has defined it as a method of social and political change that demands recognition of the humanity of the other. In this case Amabelle’s love demands recognition of what is systemically and discursively excluded from Dominican national imaginations in the security she feels with Sebastien: African ancestry and Blackness, the memories that are conjured in their embrace. Sandoval writes that this particular kind of love is also “a political technology, [that is,] a body of knowledges, arts, practices, and procedures for re-forming the self and the world...a dissident and coalitional consciousness effective in making a place for creative forms of opposition” (4-5). Love creates a space for other modes of being and other

logics that reorganize how the world is understood by breaking through the sediment of a discourse that violently marks certain bodies as unworthy. Following this logic, we can thus conclude that loving Blackness as political resistance has the power to transform ways of being in the world, and works actively to create the conditions necessary to move against the forces of colonization and violent/exclusionary nationalist discourses to reclaim Black lives and say that they matter. It is precisely this oppositional love that also works to refuse the dehumanizing processes that the false binaries of (Haitian/Dominican) have engendered, in an effort to (re)make life differently.

A Deterritorialized, Wayfaring Desire

With the loss of Sebastien, and thus the imaginative-loving space outside of the family, Amabelle realizes that she is no longer able to “align” herself with the goals of her Dominican “kin.” Munro comments on this particular death as one that underscores the novel’s testimonial nature, pushing Amabelle to question official records and create other ways of narrating history:

“Because she is unable to discover how he died, Sebastien remains to her a story without an ending, an unfinished narrative, or as she says, “a body... with no shadow” (281). Her testimony is essentially an attempt to validate his existence, to maintain and valorize the open-endedness and unknowability of his life and death. It is also a bid to rescue his memory from the anonymity that the massacre imposes on its victims. (91)

Munro goes one to state that the loss of Sebastien builds upon the novel’s representation of “the deliberately disjointed juxtaposition of the traumatizing past and the traumatized present” (92). He claims that because of this historical silence, there “is no clearly empowering, literal move out of silence...and into agency,” and that the fragments of the narrative remain forever “troubling and disjointed” (92-93). However, while recognizing that Amabelle does not necessarily come into a new, powerful “voice” for the island, the structures of feeling that undergird her journey and impress themselves upon her as well as the spaces through which she passes direct the reader toward a different kind of “agency.” If others understand agency as the ability to speak back, Amabelle does indeed speak back to power through her *yearnings* of wholeness and connection and the orientation of these yearnings—for it is within this emotionally charged space that we truly begin to understand the island otherwise that our protagonist would perhaps like to bring into being.

After leaving Alegría because of racial and ethnic tensions at both a family and national level, Amabelle and her group of Haitian wayfarers arrive to the border-town of Dajabón. Here the state of distress, sorrow, and misfortune that characterize the “unhappy stranger” is played out on a linguistic level. The physical violence that language

exerts over the Haitian population manifests itself as the Parsley Massacre of 1937. Language during this dark time in Dominican history was used as an official marker of national belonging and racial identity.³ Those that were able to “properly” pronounce the Spanish word *perejil*, were considered legitimate members of Dominican society.

The emotional intensity with which Amabelle narrates this extermination serves a political purpose. Amabelle, for the color of her skin and the bodies with whom she surrounds herself, is not given the space nor opportunity to legitimate herself within the nation when asked to produce the official articulation of *perejil*: “I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly, the way I often asked ‘Perejil?’ of the old Dominican women [...] I didn’t get my chance [...] Our jaws were pried open and parsley stuffed into our mouths” (193). After horrifying descriptions of the various other ways in which her group of Haitian wayfarers were tortured, Amabelle enters into a curious and specific description of the happiness that el Generalísimo’s soldiers displayed after the event. Emphasis is placed upon the Guardia’s “squealing and laughing” and the “shrieking laughter of women they were lingering to tease” in the open air of the night (198-9). These emotions are juxtaposed to the closed-off and hidden area in which Amabelle must recover from her wounds and lament the loss of a comrade. The wayfarers are pushed from the open space that becomes militarized and policed to expel non-conforming bodies, to a space that remains hidden and full of pain. It is from this painful place that there is a desire for a story that could be uttered from the specific locus of the other and the particular position that this other occupies in society in order to speak back to the violence that intends to give form to a cohesive national identity on both sides.

This exile from the realms of a state, family, and narrative oriented happiness moves Amabelle and other Haitian cane-workers to migrate. As Sebastien declares to Amabelle before his disappearance: “They say we are the burnt crud at the bottom of the pot. They say some people don’t belong anywhere and that’s us. I say we are a group of *mayajè*, wayfarers. This is why you had to travel this far to meet me, this is what we are” (56). The image that Sebastien conjures is one in which colonial/national limits are disarticulated through the movement of bodies that ends in the union of two lovers. Juxtaposed with Señora Valencia’s nationalist rootedness based as she claims upon the *loving* commitment to her family (those alive and buried), Amabelle’s uncertainty and effective statelessness becomes a difficult but also potentially more liberatory position. The oppositional love toward which the wayfarer moves may liberate the wayfarer from

³ As Lauren Derby and Dixia Ramirez so aptly lay out, within the *trujillista* discourse race was a volatile term. When this term appears, it is often through the perpetuation of *criollo* interests. The *criollo* category thus came to be the privileged form of the Dominican national imaginary, as it allows relatively easy access to whiteness and incorporation into the “modern” nation. For it was a social category that allowed one to “transcend” blackness in order to be accepted by the state under certain social, cultural, economic conditions. As Derby argues, under Trujillo, blackness was anything but Dominican and was violently repressed with military force (see *The Dictator’s Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo* and *Colonial Phantoms*).

the *root* of the national family.⁴ This national love is often invoked when defending the nation against others who threaten to “steal” the nation away. However, upon directing her love toward another Haitian body, outside of the Dominican family, Amabelle undoes this national/family-oriented desire in search of a new loving union and the oppositional space that this union creates. While the reference to love in this passage is a type of romantic love which does not in itself make a community, the possibility of community-building through love is made salient in how the concept guides Amabelle on her journey. She describes the group with whom she travels as wayfarers in their own right, each searching for that lost state of wholeness, that may never come. In this way, each of Amabelle’s comrades are imbued with an orientation away from officially-imagined sovereignties, and each is in search of that loving embrace with ancestors, family, or lovers that have all experienced the violence of dispossession and displacement.

Here it is important to consider this wayfaring positionality, as it is a key term in my argument in moving toward a loving space of Relation—the wholeness for which Amabelle and her fellow migrants yearn. Danticat specifically uses the term wayfarer to express Amabelle’s position as “stateless,” or a body without a home who must journey to find spaces of belonging and comfort. It is also closely associated with Amabelle’s love for Sebastien and her desire for a union that may perhaps make her feel whole, a way to suture the fragmentation that History has wrought upon her Haitian ancestors. As Dixia Ramirez argues, government officials and arbiters of culture have considered emigration and migration a “problem to the cohesion of the Dominican nation-state since the 19th century” (25). These displaced bodies are placed differently within national and diasporic imaginaries depending on their race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. She writes also that the stories of the displaced who do not embody the hegemonic ideals of a national or diasporic subject are often left untold. In this way, Danticat uses the term “vwayajè/wayfarer” to advocate for those working-class and poor nonwhite Haitians, Dominicans and Dominicans of Haitian descent, to tell how they also experience the pain of exile and lead transnational lives—even for those who have never left the island and live between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It is this wayfaring position that speaks to the ways in which even those who have never left the island actively contribute to undoing conservative Dominican and Haitian nationalisms. This subaltern movement, directed toward a space of love, works to uncover the national and imperial powers to refuse the silence that has been imposed upon them.

This type of wayfaring love, then, refers to an affective tie that recognizes and validates the most basic humanity of those that have been denied an official space in the history of a nation. Sebastien, in his disappearance and the silence surrounding his absence, becomes a metonymic representation of all Haitians disappeared by the

⁴ Following Glissant, the *root* is used to denote a singular and un-changing form of meaning. Glissant demonstrates that colonial history represents a “fixing” of movement and ideas into a rigid nation-state, which “tended to form around an idea of power – the totalitarian drive of the single, unique *root*” (14, my emphasis).

Dominican state. As the wayfaring positionality suggests in *The Farming of Bones*, there exists a movement toward a loving memory that goes beyond the foundational fictions of both nations (Sommer) to suggest that love may be a way for colonial subjects to recognize themselves as human beings and validate their place and role in the movement of history across imposed and violent geopolitical borders. While colonial or “anti-Black” and “anti-Haitian” nationalist discourse has historically worked to divide and exclude the other, the politics of a decolonial love expressed by the wayfarer articulate the enactment of a future community that may act as a force of resistance by embracing the very Blackness that the nation fears. Thus, love becomes another way of “knowing” the other that transforms the colonial subject into a visible agent of history. This type of love requires not only recognizing the difference of the other but assuming that difference, beyond tolerance. It implies an understanding of the impossibility of communication and the unlivability that certain nationalist discourses enact.

Alegría and the River that Conjures

As *The Farming of Bones* centers the politics of happiness within the national/family model and a love that disrupts the orientation toward the nation-state, the novel’s attention to this emotional dynamic is further enriched through its engagement with geographic space. Linking the Dominican model of filiation with the exclusive politics of the rural town of Alegría allows us to further delve into the ways in which emotions organize questions of belonging. In order to answer these questions, we must take a closer look at Amabelle’s adoptive town of Alegría.

Throughout *The Farming of Bones*, the space of Alegría, translated literally as “happiness” or “joy,” plays a major role in the development of the plot as setting, protagonist, and theme of various sections of the text. Likewise, there exists a constant return to the geographic space of the river that both separates and joins Haiti and the Dominican Republic. As the novel suggests, the “happy” Dominican and wealthy Haitian homes located within Alegría are found behind gated entrances and manicured gardens (290). Difference in this community is looked at with suspicion and many of the heads of family are officials in the Trujillo government. The families that together make up the rural town are portrayed in the novel as leading a rather comfortable existence, their children playfully on their way to school and “husbands leaving in chauffeured automobiles with curtained black windows” (289). In this regard, throughout the text, Alegría becomes the space of a Dominican/Haitian oligarchy that brings to the fore questions of geographical disparities in wealth and power. Belonging to this town is set aside for only those families who are officially able to demonstrate their cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic cards of entrance. Those inhabitants that do not form part of the families in power are constructed as the feudal servants: “pantry maids,” “vendors,” and “egg women” that serve the official inhabitants of the joyful town.

The “happy” life that the residents of Alegría lead then forms a world that works to exclude those who cause discomfort, those who break the illusion of happy existence. As Ahmed writes, “the everyday habits of happiness [...] involve ways of thinking about the world that shape how the world coheres,” that is, “[t]he promise of happiness is what makes certain objects proximate, affecting how the world gathers around us” (2010a 14-15). Those who are systemically excluded from the town’s imaginary, are thus also excluded from the image of the ideal society that they are trying to reach and from certain rights that official bodies enjoy, such as the right to a history and a voice. Therefore, if the reproduction of the same familial or societal structure is what engenders a state of happiness, then those who fall outside of these structures cannot hope to reach such a happy existence. In this regard, the *happy* perfection of society is highly dependent upon certain exclusions. Thus, the promise of happiness for marginal bodies in a place that refuses to include their presence consists of an endless search for an alternative geographic space, which is what Amabelle must do in order to recover her history and search for a voice. Amabelle will ultimately reject this promise that is never fulfilled by the wealthy of both nations and choose to submerge her body in the fluid space of the border.

After fleeing the Dominican Republic and taking up residency with Yves and his family in Haiti, Amabelle is asked by a friend about her town on the other side of the border. Still excluded from a sense of national belonging, Amabelle reflects on what she has left behind. Here a Haitian friend asks Amabelle about Alegría:

“Where did you live there?” she asked.

“Alegría,” I said.

[...]

“People I was with, they’d christen places. And the name they gave these places nobody outside knew. Was there much joy where you were, that they’d call it Alegría?”

For as long as I could remember, people had always called the cluster of rich homes and mountains, streams, and cane fields that surrounded Señora Valencia’s house, Alegría.

“Maybe the people who called it this were jesting,” I said. (253)

With these lines, the disconnect between official members of society and those that inhabit the margins in terms of structures of emotion that reinforce a racial and social division becomes apparent. Amabelle does not recognize existence within the walls of Alegría as one of bliss or repose, thus confirming her position as racial, ethnic, cultural, economic, and linguistic other. The begotten walled rural oligarchy of Señora Valencia perpetuates a culture of sanitized, uncritical, and exclusionary collective memories and omits any possibility of difference. The community itself becomes another barrier to

social, racial, linguistic, and ethnic inclusion rather than one that may perhaps embrace change.

When Amabelle, once again, crosses the border in search of information about her past, she finds that “Alegría is now a closed town, a group of haciendas behind high walls cemented with metal spikes and broken bottles on top. Flamboyants towered over these walls and old men crouching in cane-back chairs guarded the gates. [It] was a fortress, everyone an intruder” (288-9). Alegría has become an armed bastion that guards Dominican history and collective identity. The idea that “everyone [is] an intruder” speaks once again to the exclusionary politics of the “happy” city. Alegría has become a space that rigidly regulates the relations among official members and “unhappy” strangers. When Amabelle enters, she experiences discomfort and an overwhelming sense of out-of-placeness, which reinforces a felt sense of intrusion.

She soon realizes that her former home has changed beyond recognition: “I felt as though I was in a place I had never seen before [...] I was lost” (289). Amabelle’s memory of the rural town, as well as the town’s memory of Amabelle, has almost entirely vanished. Once arriving to the Valencia’s new—more secluded and gated—home, Señora Valencia initially fails to recognize Amabelle: “That she did not recognize me made me feel that I had come back to Alegría and found it had never existed at all” (294). The fantasy of any intimate relation that may have existed is broken, leaving Amabelle finally detached from the Dominican family she used to serve. The disorienting effect of this encounter as well as Amabelle’s feelings of discomfort upon returning to Alegría, further supports our ideas about who qualifies as a citizen of this community.

Amabelle is made a stranger to the realm of happiness, and is pressed by a way of life that actively and systematically excludes her—she, among the other Haitian strangers in the town, become those bodies that disrupt the happy flow of life—that “kill the joy”—to bring attention to processes of racial, ethnic, and linguistic violence. In this sense, the narrative is one that also kills official joy, and may thus provide a glimpse of a process through which the world can be rebuilt, a process that shakes those who slumber in a happy existence to their very core in order to enact change in the present: “To kill joy [...] is to open a life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for chance” (Ahmed 2010b, 20). It is precisely this push to “make room” that defines Amabelle’s path in the novel, that is, the desire to rewrite a history of the Dominican Republic and Haiti from the perspective of those who are constructed as outcasts in both worlds. The story works to speak truth to power and open an uncomfortable space in a narrative that would otherwise question the very legitimacy of Haitian bodies within a nation that privileges its European roots. In this process of rewriting national identity from the margins, Amabelle not only teaches us what it is like to be the “unhappy” stranger, but also estranges us from the very “happiness” that the familiar narrative of *dominicanidad* offers.

Once embracing a transcendence of national categories, and thus a radically transnational existence. Amabelle stays to dwell in the space of the border. Amabelle feels that upon entering into the waters that run between both nations that she can just barely

glimpse a space of openness and acceptance that are the sites of love and liberation, conjured by the memories and ghosts of her loved ones. The border becomes a metaphorical cultural scar that is hospitable to pain, to being the culturally “unhappy”—it is the open wound that needs to be revisited by Amabelle who herself is wounded, and in the inhabitation of the wound history may be revisited and perhaps change may emerge: “In the coal black darkness of a night like this, unless you are near it, the river ceases to exist, allowing you to imagine just for a moment that all of them—my mother and father, Wilner, Odette, and the thousands whose graves are here—died natural deaths, peaceful deaths...the kind of death where there is time to think about what we are leaving behind and what better things may lie ahead” (304). Those that Amabelle has lost appear to her in this place, their memory conjured in the love and pain that has driven her on this last journey. As Shemak illustrates, the river holds deep meaning for those who must constantly face the harsh reality of exile; the river is used to “cleanse their labor’s residue off their bodies, reconnect with their community, and pay homage to their dead” (Shemak 96). Harford Vargas also speaks to the affective potential of the river to bring bodies together in transnational unity. For her, this is done through “talk,” what Danticat defines as “a way of being joined to your old life through the presence of another person” (73). Harford Vargas writes that “talk” is observed by other migrants near the shores of the river, and it becomes a practice to conjure intimacies that transcend geopolitical boundaries:

This practice of oral storytelling and witnessing nourishes communities of affect in the Dominican Republic and helps maintain transnational communities of linked fate with those in Haiti, sustaining connections through intimate oral communication. The process of witnessing and being witnessed to is deemed sacred by Father Romain in his sermons to his Haitian congregation as he “often remind[s] everyone of common ties: language, foods, history, carnival, songs, tales, and prayers. His creed was one of memory, how remembering—though sometimes painful—can make you strong” (Danticat 73). Memory communicated through the telling of one’s own story or another’s story fashions an oral archive that maintains cultural traditions across national borders and provides personal and communal agency.

I argue that it is precisely this memory that pushes Amabelle and shapes her vision for the future. However, I build upon this by claiming that what truly connects bodies across space and time, and what Amabelle uses to conjure this memory is wayfaring love—a movement toward and for those bodies that have been systematically pushed to the edges of national belonging. “Talk” is first mentioned in Amabelle’s reflection on the space that she shared with Sebastien, and invoked again at the end of the novel to refer to stories passed back and forth across the border. In this moment, the loving space created between Black bodies is closely associated with the intimate space of “witnessing” and

“communal agency.” It is the oppositional love that defies boundaries that makes a new “oral archive” possible.

This oppositional love found in the flow of the river also facilitates what Ramirez would call “the process of unghosting,” that is, in recalling the treacherous journeys surrounded by water that her ancestors and many others have made, Amabelle opens an anti-hegemonic space to reimagine the nation as one that centers the bodies that it has literally and figuratively consumed. The echoes of the past reappear to Amabelle here, as do others who have been fragmented by the river: “A shadow slipped out of the stretch of water before me...It was the professor...Would the slaughter—the river—one day surrender to him his sanity the same way it had once snatched it away?” (307). Like Amabelle, the professor has also returned to the river—the border—to search for the answers that it has for so long kept silent. This space becomes the geography where Black bodies made unhappy by processes of othering feel that they belong, where they reside together “looking for the dawn” (310).

In this way, this painful place functions as a source of knowledge, a fluid archive that might perhaps speak against those discourses that generalize, against an intolerant national fantasy of isolation and homogeneity, against the masculine drive toward the erection of immutable borders, and silence. As Amabelle claims in this moment as she wades to its center, “The water was warm for October, warm and shallow, so shallow that I could be on my back in it with my shoulders only half submerged, the current floating over me in a less than gentle caress, the pebbles in the riverbed scouring my back. I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for the relief from a fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow” (310). Here, the wound functions as a constant reminder of the violence that the drive toward the modern nation-state wields against those left outside of the imaginary; for it is only when Amabelle submerges herself in the waters and feels the embrace that she can also feel the texture of history against her body—one whose flow is driven by tears and whose abrasive silt scrapes at her skin. However, she finds comfort in knowing that it is in this space where she can also be closest to those that she has lost and find the memories necessary to create a “soft” space of her own opened by love that contradicts the “hard” and violent waters that have forged her current location.

This ending challenges the reader to attend to the dangers that receding into fixed notions of national love and patriotism may entail, and the historical/emotional gaps that they guard. This fixity keeps submerged the voices that might speak out against unspoken violence, and who might reach out across the imaginary void to recognize the other side as integral to the self. Glissant writes that “Relation is not made of things that are foreign but of *shared knowledge*” (8, my emphasis). In this passage, the painful, yet intimate space of proximity that Glissant privileges is another open wound located in the Atlantic—the Middle Passage—making his conceptualization of Relation an epistemology that enables freedom through an intimate and traumatic collective experience that is not closed off to difference but assumes it as the foundation of reality. Danticat, through her novel, builds

on this notion of a shared collective experience of Relation by constructing a community brought together not only by shared trauma, but by those loving connections that are so often abused and discouraged by the state—and uncovered through her own position as *mwayajè*, an unofficial voice with the radical power to speak back through story. These projects seek to go farther than a facile struggle against exclusionary practices and racial/ethnic othering or imaginary Black/white binary often reinforced in arguments of Haitian/Dominican belonging; they move us to a new (imaginary) terrain in which questions such as *who are “we” and where do “we” belong* can be politically re-imagined and put into practice—that “dream” of comfort and solidarity that Amabelle imagines as the waters rush over her body. It is then a genuine connection and need to recognize—not an imposed national love for either side of the island—that requires a different way of thinking and the risk of putting oneself in intimate contact with others in order to change the terms upon which a nation is constructed. At times, one must inhabit the violent river of the past, in order to see more clearly how the present has been constructed, and to daringly envision a new future, a new space made clear in the memories of those we dare to radically love.

By exposing how happiness and love work within the family/national structures of the Dominican Republic, the novel simultaneously produces a critical understanding of how violence, as a force of national expression, is directed toward some bodies and not others. In other words, happiness becomes the “feeling of structure” of Dominican society under a national discourse that constructs Haitians as the racialized and threatening Other. By desiring differently, Amabelle proposes a third position—a place of radical love—that uncovers (“unghosts”) those hidden moments of violence that haunt the island and privileges radical connection across borders. In constructing the border as a place of alternative knowledge, then, we can confront and begin to speak back toward nationalist violence that continues to silence the voices and history of Haitians left stateless in the DR in contemporary times. The novel makes evident that perhaps by listening to the voices of the dispossessed we can address the injustices of the past and the current social and political inequalities that stem directly from these injustices. Engaging with this novel in the wake of the 2013 court decision emphasizes the need for a more radical conceptualization of love and connection and warns us to think more critically about easy fantasies of national happiness.

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