The Uses of Memory: *In the Time of the Butterflies* and *The Farming of Bones*

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Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.
[Monica Wittig, Les guerilleres, 1968]

Many Caribbean novels are concerned with History and how to recuperate it. An important historical period in the Dominican Republic dealt with by the Dominican-American writer Julia Álvarez in her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*[1] (1997) and the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat in *The Farming of Bones*[2] (1998) is the military dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. Álvarez's is concerned with the life of the Mirabal sisters whose code name was "las mariposas", and who died in an ambush ordered by General Trujillo in 1960. Focusing on another aspect of the Trujillo era, Edwidge Danticat deals with the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937.

Although both novels are fictionalized accounts of the historical moment, they are brought about by the urgent need to reclaim the voices silenced by mainstream history. Álvarez claims she wrote out of the need to understand the Mirabal sisters' "special courage". "I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination" (324). Danticat claims she wrote *The Farming* because she needed to tell the story of the anonymous victims of the massacre. In both novels, memory is used as a way to recapture the past. However, Álvarez stresses the fragility of memory and its fleeting and unreliable qualities, whereas Danticat

[1] All quotes are from: Julia Álvarez. *In the Time of the Butterflies*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.
[2] All quotes are from: Edwidge Danticat. *The Farming of Bones*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

stresses the therapeutic value of memory. Remembering for Danticat is vital to re-establish connections, vital to move on, to survive. Thus, the ways in which each writer uses memory to construct her story is the focus of this paper.

According to Susan Willis in "Histories, Communities and Sometimes Utopia"[3] the most obvious way in which history enters black women's writing is by "reconstructing the development of the character's individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race, the struggles of her community and the relationship that have developed within the family"(815). Both of the novels follow Willis's description. Each centers on the characters' private lives and shows how history shapes, and dramatically redefines the personal.

Besides the historical moment, memory is essential to the way both novels are structured. In the novel *In the Time of the Butterflies,* each of the four Mirabal sisters tells her own story, the story of her relationships, her loves and her eventual marriage as well as the degree of each woman's involvement in the clandestine meetings and activities aimed at overthrowing the government.

Having each sister tell her own story that often intersects with another sister's story provides another slant to a particular incident. The first person narrator also allows for each sister's particular character to stand out. The Mirabals, after all, were not one person, although they seem to have become one in the myth created around them; a myth that lives on in the film version where the only sister who stands out is Minerva, and even this sister loses a lot of the spunk, verve and rebelliousness with which her character is imbued in the novel.

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[3] Susan Willis. "Histories, Communities and Sometimes Utopia". *Feminisms*. Ed. Robin R Warhol and D. Price Herndl. New Jersey: Rutgers, UP, 1991: 815-835.

In *The Farming of Bones,* Amabelle, the protagonist, is the sole narrator of both the communal and the private story of the historical moment on which the novel is based. Although Amabelle is the main purveyor of narrative, other characters like Sebastien, her lover, Papi, her adopted father, and Valencia, her mistress often contribute their stories to the narration, but only as retold by Amabelle. At the peak of the genocide, other victims testify to the atrocities (how they escaped, and how they survived), again through the filter of Amabelle's voice.

However, because of the problematic nature of the first person narrator, the reliability of the narrator and how much of the story is unconsciously, or not, distorted to serve history, to protect others, or to destroy myth must be questioned. As Gayle Greene suggests in "The Uses of Memory"[4]

> Memory revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies: it includes, it omits, embellishes or represses, decorates or drops, according to imperatives of its own. Far from being a trustworthy transcriber of "reality," it is a shaper and shape shifter that takes liberties with the past as artful and lying as any taken by the creative writer (Greene 294).

The fact that both Álvarez and Danticat employ the first person narrative voice allows them the freedom to invest particular moments with significance and even take certain liberties with historical data. They are shape shifters providing new meaning and shape to two events that have been either effaced or distorted by the individual and collective memory.

Álvarez writes in the "Postscript" to the novel that her reconstruction of the lives of the Mirabal sisters is an attempt to understand what in their lives could provide for their extraordinary courage. Yet, she constantly reminds the reader of the inconsistencies, tricks and

whims of memory in order to distance herself from the burden of history.[5] Álvarez attempts to create a life for the Mirabal's that does them justice but does not deify them, for "by making them myth we lost the Mirabal sisters once more, dismissing the challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women"(324).

Dedé has become the repository of the family memories. In the first Chapter we find her fretting over the visit of yet another reporter who wants to hear the story of the Mirabal sisters. For thirty years she has retold the story of her family, especially her sisters' story. She does this automatically "used to this fixed monolithic language around interviewers and mythlogizers of her sisters"(7). When the reporter asks Dedé how she goes about life with such apparent ease, Dedé says she tries to concentrate only on the happy moments. She then tells herself "and when that doesn't work I get stuck playing the same bad moment... "(7). Her response is a ready made performance for outsiders. By adding the interior monologue, Álvarez readies us to mistrust this apparently trustworthy purveyor of history.

In Dedé 's second intervention, Chapter Two, we are reminded of the elusiveness of memory. Pierre Nora's [6] statement that "memory... accommodates those facts that suit it" serves Álvarez's purpose (285). Dedé, the receiver of memories, has a difficult task to confront. She must tell the story of the Mirabal's that the people want to hear. "Nonsense, so much nonsense the memory cooks up, mixing facts, putting in a little of this and a little of that"(72). Dedé tries to control memory in the way she once tried to control her father's finances. Interestingly, the novel suggests that because she was not allowed to control her own finances

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[4] Gayle Greene. "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 16.2 (1991): 290-321.

[5] By this burden I mean fidelity and/or accuracy of details, events, memory itself. This is Julia Álvarez's story. This is the way she imagines the sisters; this is her way of appropriating history, if you wish.

once she marries Jaimito all his business ventures fail**.** She was the one, after all, with a knack for business; the fact that she either refuses or isn't allowed to manage hers and Jaimito's business affairs seem to precipitate their repeated failures. Her renewed interest in finances, in keeping records, after the sisters' death, parallels her keeping of the historical documents, or the memories, at least. To further stress her financial savoir-faire, Dedé becomes a successful insurance salesperson. "Everyone wants to buy insurance from the woman who just missed being killed along with her sisters"(5).

One of Dedé's tools for dealing with memory is a game that Minerva invents while in prison. The game consists of trying to relive a happy memory. While in prison Minerva tries to coax Maria Teresa who is on the brink of a nervous breakdown to play the game, but she isn't successful. "Day by day goes by and I [Mate] begin to lose courage and wallow in dark thoughts... I start to cry I can't take it anymore... "(236-237). Minerva, on the other hand, plays the memory game to safeguard her sanity. However, when she is at home during her house arrest period, Minerva is assaulted by the painful memories she had successfully repressed in jail. The toll on her psyche is physically disabling. She yearns for sleep as an escape from the pain of living. In her last intervention, Chapter Three, Minerva, who once longed for freedom, now locks herself up in her bedroom. Her curiosity and lust for life spent her thirst for adventure quenched.

> I would seek the quiet of the bedroom, slip out of my dress and lie under the sheets watching the sun speckling the leaves through the barely opened jalousies ... Bits and pieces of the past would bob up in the watery soup of my thoughts those days ... I'd sit

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[6] Pierre Nora. "Between Memory and History: Lieux de memoire." *History and Memory in African American Culture*. Ed. Génviève Fabre and Roberto O' Meally. New York: Oxford, UP, 1994.

up shocked at what I was letting happen to me. I had been so much stronger and braver in prison. Now at home I was falling apart (258).

The simile "memory as watery soup" stresses the unreliability of memory and how the exact details are usually watered down versions of reality. In the few weeks Minerva has spent at home, she is already struggling to remember how it really was, for the truth is already slipping away. Even the horror of her days in prison takes on a fictional nuance. "But those memories too began to fade. They became stories. Everyone wanted to hear them. Mate and I could keep the house entertained for hours, telling and retelling the horrors until the sting was out of them"(259).

Minerva realizes how much this experience has changed her, even in the eyes of the community. She has become the invincible "mariposa", a thing of myth and superhuman capacities. She is awed and frightened by this new role imposed on her, for she doesn't feel the strength, which once moved her into action. She actually feels ready to "succumb to a nervous attack"(259).

When her friend Elsa comes to visit her during the period of house arrest, Elsa recalls an incident when they were young and had performed for Trujillo in a school event. Yet, each woman recalls the moment differently. In Elsa's story Minerva had aimed her arrow at Trujillo; in Minerva's version it had been her friend Sinita, the one who had introduced her to the dark side of Trujillo's regime. "I wondered which of us had revised the past to suit the lives we were living now. “Ay, Elsa”, she protests. "That's not how it happened"(264). Creating doubt in the reader's mind serves Álvarez’s purpose well for she seems to stress the notion that memory is defective and the truth of any one thing will never be fully apprehended.

Thus, Álvarez insists that the truth of what happened to the Mirabal sisters may never be known. In the Epilogue Dedé wraps the story up for us always insisting that there are different versions of what happened. Even the men accused of murdering her sisters, give conflicting versions when on trial of what, and how things happened.

Knowing that the people who still believed in the Mariposas needed a story that would help them keep the faith, Dedé decides to tell her own version of the events. Once she has gotten a grip of herself and has listened to every single person that had something to say about her sisters, the regime, the tragic day, she begins to tell her own story of the Mariposas. "After the fighting was over and we were a broken people... that's when I opened my doors and instead of listening I started talking. We had lost hope and we needed a story to understand what had happened to us"(313).

Telling stories is also crucial to Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones.* The main story framing the novel begins in the 1930s when General Trujillo decides to cleanse the nation of foreigners—mainly Haitians-- who would destroy the ethnic purity of the race. Since most Haitians, especially those who had been living in the country for a number of years, could pass as Dominicans, it was decided that the best way to identify them was by asking them to pronounce the word *perejil* on the mistaken[7] belief that Haitians could not trill the "r" and this would make their capture and deportation[8] easier.

Although chronologically Álvarez and Danticat's novels do not intersect, for *The Farming* begins in 1937 whereas *The Butterflies* begins in 1938, Álvarez mentions, in passing, the killing of Haitians in the border by Trujillo but the incident is not corroborated, or

7 Mistaken because there were also Dominicans who had been either raised by Haitians or in other parts that also had difficulty trilling the "r".
8 The lucky ones were deported, many other were killed. An estimated 35,000 Haitians were killed.

investigated. In "Reclaiming Julia, Álvarez," Shara MaCallum,[9] accuses Álvarez of recreating and perpetuating hegemonic class and race structures prevalent in the Dominican Republic by ignoring the Afro Caribbean experience in her novel. Álvarez's reluctance to openly deal with class, race and the massacre of the Haitians is questionable, but understandable in light of her own allegiance to the upper middle class.

Because issues of race and class are central to her story, Danticat cannot ignore the experience of the poor and the black. After all, the main reason for the Dominican persecution and violence towards Haitians is closely linked to the prevalent discourse at the time that managed to circumvent "the presence and wider significance of the blacks and mulattoes" and chooses identification with the Spaniards and the Taínos.[10] Trujillo and his government use the Haitians and their color to sidestep the growing unease in the country with his own regime. "Our motherland is Spain, theirs is the darkest Africa"(Danticat 260).

Again unlike Álvarez's multivocal narrative voice, Danticat opts for one narrator, one voice in *The Farming,* and that is Amabelle's. Amabelle's voice is that of the underprivileged, and it is as such that her account of the killings of Haitians in Dominican Republic is perceived. Thus, Amabelle is very much aware of class and the privileged position of her employers. "Working for others you must always be on your guard"(18), or "Working for others you learn to be present and invisible at the same time..."(35)

Both novels disrupt chronology by bringing in memories from the removed past. Minerva, for example, remembers how it used to be when she was younger and wanted to be free; Amabelle remembers life as a child in Haiti, and the death of her parents. However, *The*

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[9] Shara McCallum. "Reclaiming Julia, Álvarez: *In the Time of the Butterflies."*Women's Studies. 29.1 (Feb 2000): 93-118.

Butterflies, has a circular structure, *The Farming* doesn't. Álvarez's novel begins and ends with Dedé's story, and back in the fictive present. At the beginning of *The Farming,* Amabelle seems to be conjuring up Sebastien by naming him. Although she uses the present tense, we later realize that hers is both the voice of the young innocent woman of twenty-four with whom the story begins, and also that of the aging survivor. This crisscrossing between the present and the past is not overt, but subtle. For example, she'll say something that places her both in the present and the past like: "There were many shadows ... At times Sebastien Onius guarded me from the shadows. At other times he was one of them"(4).

Despite the obvious historical urgency of this novel, Amabelle's personal story and the events that have marked her existence before history catches up with her move the plot forward. Particularly significant is the death of her parents who die trying to cross the river, an incident that haunts Amabelle's dreams. Another aspect of the protagonist's life is her "adoption" into a Dominican family of means. She is brought up as a poor relative. She plays with the daughter of the house, but also runs chores. When the daughter of the house, Señora Valencia grows and marries Amabelle becomes a combination maid and companion. She eats in the kitchen with the other servants and uses Valencia's hand-me-downs. It is not surprising then that Amabelle has few qualms about abandoning her mistress when the time comes.

According to Zia Jaffrey, the novel is "a meditation on the effects of trauma"(65). Trauma in the novel includes reconstructing the events, surviving them, coping with the aftermath and finally coming to terms with them. In order to deal with that trauma, Amabelle uses various strategies. First, she holds on to memories. At first her dreams and her conversations with Sebastien, her lover, are about her parents. He asks her questions so that she

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[10] Roberto Márquez. "Naationailsm, Nation and Ideology: trends in the Emergence of a Caribbean literatrue."The

can remember them and so that he, through her memories, can hold on to the memory of his own father.

Amabelle fights oblivion. After Sebastien's disappearance, she holds on to his memory by going wherever possible to tell his story, to ask about his whereabouts. It's important that he not become one of the forgotten. "His name is Sebastien Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail, a dress with no hem, a body in the sunlight with no shadow"(281). She will not allow him to become one of the anonymous victims forgotten by history like the thousands of men, women and children that died in the 1937 genocide. "Men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air" (282).

Danticat, like Álvarez,[11] is concerned with memory and its uses because only by stirring the collective memory are change and restitution possible. Thus, both writers bring the past to bear on the present. Fear of forgetting is present in *The Farming* in the character of Amabelle when she fears her memory of Sebastien will become ever more fleeting as time goes by like that of her parents.

> When it came to my parents, the older I became, the more they were fading from me, until all I could see were the last moments spent with them in the river. The rest blended together like the ingredients in a too-long-simmered stew: reveries and dream, wishes fantasies. Is that what it would also come to with Sebastien? (245).

Struggling to remember and to survive is another way Amabelle deals with trauma. Amabelle is kicked, spat on, and beaten in her attempt to reach the river, the boundary between life and death, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Her constant companion is Yves who, like

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Modern Caribbean. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1989. 293-340.

[11] In a more recent novel *In the Name of Salomé (2000)*, Álvarez reconstructs the life of another subversive woman, the Dominican poet Salomé Ureña.

Amabelle, has nightmares of his father. In his dreams his father is choking to death on a huge plate of food. Yves, who had been Sebastien's best friend, is a haunted soul just like Amabelle. He feels the guilt of the survivor and takes it on himself to protect her. He takes her to his mother who welcomes Amabelle as a daughter. Man Rapadou, Yves' mother, allows Amabelle to grow old with them even though she knows that Yves and her adopted daughter have been so hurt by life that they cannot even find solace in one another.

Yves and Amabelle use their creative talents to patch their broken lives. Yves becomes a successful farmer. Amabelle takes up sewing to support herself, and to fend off the painful memories. "He [Yves] and I had both chosen a life of work to console us after the slaughter. We had too many phantoms to crowd those quiet moments when every ghost would appear in its true form and refuse to go away"(274). Sewing is used in the novel as a metaphor for memory, and for survival. Amabelle stitches threads of memory together, piecing together the narrative, and at the same time sewing together the fragments of her life in order to understand what happened, and survive.

Putting stories together is, after all, an important therapeutic device. We tell stories when we need to understand, or analyze what has happened to us. In *The Farming*, many stories are told, mostly by Amabelle. Her stories make up the whole of the novel. Like stories rumors, too, are crucial. According to Zia Jaffrey,[12] "Rumor becomes an invisible character" (64). Rumors, like memories, are deceptive, but often a convenient companion, and often only source of news in a repressed society. The news that Haitians in other towns are being taken away comes to the people in Amabelle's village through rumors. Rumors say that poor Dominicans are being used to torture and kill the Haitians so that the government not be

[12] Zia Jaffrey. "The Cutting: *The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat." *The Nation*. 16 Nov 1998: 62:66.

directly involved. Rumor has it that their stories will be heard, that the survivors will be given a stipend. Rumor has it that this one or the other has died, or survived.

Rumors are confirmed or denied validity as the novel progresses. The confirmation of the rumors comes in the form of unwritten testimonials, stories told and retold by witnesses. "I was there..." is the constant refrain. Toward the end of the novel when Amabelle revisits the Dominican Republic, she meets Señora Valencia who doesn't recognize her and chastises her for pretending to be who she is not for the mistress was informed that Amabelle had died. After proving her identity to her former mistress, the two women and the maid, Sylvie, go looking for the waterfall that had obsessed Amabelle. Once there, Sylvie asks about the *perejil* incident. The Señora warns Sylvie that it might all be a fabrication, a rumor. "There are many stories. This is just one" she says (304). When the maid shakes her head in disbelief, Amabelle reflects on the incident and how best to convey the truth. "Perhaps there was no story that could truly satisfy. I didn't know if the story was true or even possible, but ... there are many stories. And mine too is only one" (305).

Nevertheless, stories must be told for "even disabling fictions, dysfunctional versions of the past that lock us into repetition of the past, make a kind of sense" (Greene 294). Both Álvarez and Danticat know that although not all the stories can be confirmed, in the absence of evidence, fiction must suffice. Or, as Álvarez writes, sometimes the horror of the past, "can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart"(324).

Álvarez and Danticat prove in their narratives that history is a construct, and as Greene has suggested, if the past is a construct, it can be reconstructed, changed, improved, ingrained in

the present to avoid its repetition.[13] Finally, both writers suggest that "truth" is tainted by individual perception, ideology and the historical moment. They caution against accepting one story as the authoritative version. They both use memory to help reconstruct, however tenuously, historical events that shaped the life of many, and are often silenced, ignored, or even worse, coopted. Danticat has said about the parsley incident that when she went to research the incident in the Dominican Republic and Haiti there was nothing to commemorate, or to remind the world of what had happened. "That's when I realized how fragile memory is."[14] Her novel, like Álvarez's, is meant to be that unbuilt memorial.

[13] Greene 306.
[14] Reneé H. Shea. "The Hunger to Tell: Edwidge Danticat and *The Farming of Bones*. MaComere 2 (1999):12-22.