A comparative study of Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Morrison's *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to analyse the main thematic and structural lines from which Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be compared. In their acclaimed novels, Danticat and Morrison engage in a revision and rewriting of history, taking as the basis of their narratives two historical episodes which appear marked by violence and racial oppression. Since issues of power and interpretation in the creation of history often render silenced and manipulated histories of marginalized ethnic groups, Danticat and Morrison take it upon themselves to fill historical gaps concerning African American slaves and Haitian American cane workers. Both authors undertake their historical revisions through a similar narrative technique, which includes the use of biblical passages, dreams, memory, storytelling and metaphor. Such elements are disclosed as apt means to create a counter-history where previously silenced voices can be heard.

Key words: African-American literature; Haitian-American literature; history; Edwidge Danticat; Toni Morrison.

Estudio comparado de *The Farming of Bones*, de Edwidge Danticat, y *Beloved*, de Toni Morrison

RESUMEN
El presente artículo pretende analizar las principales líneas temáticas y estructurales bajo las que se puede realizar un estudios comparativo entre las novelas *The Farming of Bones*, de Edwidge Danticat, y *Beloved*, de Toni Morrison. En estas obras, ambas autoras proyectan una revisión y reescritura de la historia, tomando como punto de partida de sus narrativas dos episodios históricos marcados por la violencia y la opresión racial. Puesto que factores como el poder o la interpretación subjetiva de los acontecimientos han formado parte de la creación de la historia, el silenciamiento y la manipulación han afectado a las historias de grupos étnicos marginados. Por ese motivo tanto Danticat como Morrison se proponen revisar las historias de los esclavos afroamericanos y los trabajadores de la caña de azúcar haitianos. Ambas autoras llevan a cabo dichas revisiones a través de una técnica narrativa similar, que incluye el uso de pasajes bíblicos, los sueños, la memoria, la tradición oral de *storytelling* y la metáfora. Todos estos elementos se desvelan como instrumentos aptos para crear una contra-historia en la que las voces anteriormente silenciadas puedan ser oídas.

Palabras clave: literatura afro-americana; literatura haitiano-americana; historia; Edwidge Danticat; Toni Morrison.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her article "A Bench by the Road" Toni Morrison refers to the incomprehensible absence of any kind of monument in honor of slavery victims, denouncing the lack of a necessary commemorative reminder of a nefarious historical institution that should never have existed: "There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road ... And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book [*Beloved*] had to" (1989a: 4). About ten years later, in her novel *The Farming of Bones*,[1] Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat makes a similar statement referring to all the innocent victims who perished in 1937 as a consequence of the massacre of Haitian citizens, at the hand of General Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic, "There were no graves, no markers. If we tried to dance on graves, we would be dancing on air" (1998: 270). Standing on the banks of the Massacre River, where the genocide had taken place, Danticat "fully realized that she wanted to make a novel out of the story" because, as she states, "There are no markers. I felt like I was standing on top of a huge mass grave, and just couldn't see the bodies. That's the first time I remember thinking, 'Nature has no memory...' and that's why we have to have memory" (Charters 1998: 42). The genesis of both *Beloved* and *TFOB* has as its basis the need these writers feel to remember and honor the victims of genocide, rescuing them from the oblivion they were forced into by history. As Danticat admits,

> The massacre is not as well-known here as it is in Haiti...But I wasn't thinking so much I wanted to popularize it with a larger audience as with younger people, like my brothers, who didn't know about it at all. It's a part of our history, as Haitians, but it's also a part of the history of the world. Writing about it is an act of remembrance. (Charters 1998: 42)

In the light of an absence of commemorative monuments, the literary discourse of the novel turns out to be an apt means to remember and pay tribute to the silenced by unnecessary oppression and death. Thus, the past is revisited and revised, notwithstanding the pain triggered by what too often turns out to be an uncomfortable journey into "unspeakable things unspoken" (Morrison 1989b: 1). Although from different time frames and settings, Morrison and Danticat are fully aware that "the

[1] Hereafter abbreviated to *TFOB*.

past is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled...the past is something with which we must come to terms" (Hutcheon 1989: 58).

But it is not only thematically that *Beloved* and *TFOB* present important similarities; narrative technique and stylistic traits also unite these two works. From an intertextual perspective, the present essay will attempt to delineate the main thematic and theoretical lines from which these novels can be compared. My intention is therefore to show the multiple connections between the novels and their authors. Despite the time span between their writings and the differences in spatial background, Morrison and Danticat share the same ancestral African roots as well as the historical experience of oppression which ultimately makes them write out of the same narrative impulse to "historicize the event of the dehistoricized" (Bhabha 1994: 198).

2. HISTORY AND THE BIBLE REVISITED

In their revisions of the past, Morrison and Danticat rewrite the individual and collective histories of the silenced and oppressed, thus creating a counter-history as an alternative to the "official" historical records. Both authors engage in a process that Morrison has denominated "literary archeology" (1987: 112), in which they rely not only on historical information but also on the workings of memory and the imagination. While Morrison draws from the real story of Margaret Garner,[2] a slave woman who killed her daughter to spare her the horrors of slavery, Danticat bases her novel on the 1937 Haitian Massacre. From these historical elements both writers create stories dominated by the flow of memory which irrupts into the present through constant flashbacks. On the other hand, the multiple recollections and viewpoints exposed by different characters contribute to a dialogic counter-history which includes previously excluded histories. In Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, "[a] word, discourse, language or culture undergoes 'dialogization' when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things" (1981: 427). To the "dialogization" of the historiographic process contribute as well the use of sources which represent a valid alternative to the traditional written records used in Western historiography. Thus, storytelling, dreams, rituals and the supernatural are extensively employed by Morrison and Danticat as necessary elements in their historical revisions.

Far from being an objective discipline based on the "cult of facts" (Carr 1987: 9) as historians like Leopold von Ranke claimed in the nineteenth century, history has been disclosed as another form of fiction where the selection and interpretation the historian makes of facts plays an important role (Carr 1987: 29-30). On the other hand, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, "the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production," which implies that "History is the fruit of power" (1995: xix). Hence, the histories of oppressed ethnic peoples have

[2] For more information on the story of Margaret Garner, see Morrison's interview with Gloria Naylor (1985: 583-584), Lerner (1972: 60-63) and Bassett's article in the abolitionist newspaper *American Baptist*, which is included in *The Black Book* (1974: 10).

been either silenced or manipulated by those who had in their hands what Trouillot terms "archival power" or "the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research and, therefore, of mention" (1995: 99).

Apart from the rewriting of history, Toni Morrison's use and revision of the Bible, especially in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, is one of her defining literary strategies.[3] The inclusion in her works of biblical allusions together with religious and folkloric elements from West African religions add to the hybridity and eclecticism of her literary stance, advocating in this way the integration, confluence and acceptance of different or divergent doctrines and viewpoints. In a similar manner, Edwidge Danticat draws on the Bible in the opening of her novel to introduce a crucial thematic element closely related to the long-standing oppression endured by her people.

Morrison's choice of an epigraph for *Beloved* is in keeping with the spirit of the novel and with the author's intention to render justice to the ethnic, emotional and physically demoted and demonized because of "the range of color on a palette" (Morrison 1992: 7). After a historical reference to the slaves who perished during the slave trade in a short epigraph that reads "Sixty Million and more," there appears a biblical quotation from Romans 9:25, "I will call them my people,/ which were not my people;/ and her beloved,/ which was not beloved." This biblical allusion emphasizes the idea of reconciliation and hope which could be viewed as the writer's claim to her people's natural right to freedom, love and respect or, ultimately, her people's natural right to be simply human.

In the context of slavery, the partition of whole families, where mothers were separated from their offspring, hindered the proper manifestation of motherly and filial love. This is what transpires in the relationship between Sethe and her returned daughter Beloved, whose name could be interpreted as a pun on the complexity and indeterminacy of this character and the feeling of love itself. On the one hand, this ghost turned flesh is the object of Sethe's love until she forces herself to kill her in order to save her from the death in life that slavery represented. On the other hand, the personification of Beloved is not really "beloved." On the contrary, no-one wants to remember or claim her for she is the embodiment of a horrific past which everyone wants to forget. Beloved feels she has been abandoned by her mother. If this character is viewed as the reincarnation of the baby Sethe killed, then her return to "life" could be interpreted as a metaphorical claim for her mother's love and presence, both of which were truncated as a consequence of her sacrifice. If on the other hand Beloved is read as an African woman who has lost her mother on the journey through the Middle Passage, she would still have the same claims over Sethe, since she views her as her lost mother. However, Beloved's assumption that her mother did not really love her is not accurate. The fact that she was truly beloved by Sethe is demonstrated precisely by the mother's decision to kill her baby to spare her all the suffering and humiliation she would otherwise have undergone as a slave woman. Hence, if Sethe's killing hand committed its deed, it was precisely out of "too thick love," as another character puts it (Morrison 1988: 164).

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[3] See, for instance, Henderson (1991), Bowers (1990) and, more recently, Ochoa (1999).

If *Beloved* "re-collects the history of all the 'disremembered and unaccounted for'...who fell victim to the African American genocide" (Broad 1994: 191), so does *TFOB* with the Haitian victims of the 1937 Massacre. A biblical passage from the Old Testament is the epigraph chosen by Danticat to introduce her novel:

> Jephthah called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-thousand were killed at the time. (Judges 12: 4-6)

The duality of language as both empowering and destructive is underscored in this episode, which parallels the experience of Haitian workers trying to cross the Massacre River into Haitian territory. In the persecution carried out under the rule of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, thousands of Haitians who worked on the sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic were massacred on the border and their bodies remained unburied in the waters of the Massacre River. Under the excuse of liberating his impoverished nation from the threat Haitian laborers represented in the job market, Trujillo implemented his racist and nationalist ideas on the racial cleansing of October 1937. In order to identify Haitians, soldiers asked them to pronounce the word "parsley" in Spanish. Haitians' difficulty to pronounce the "r" in "perejil" gave away their Kreyol accent and condemned them to a secure death. As Amabelle Desir, a survivor from the genocide states, "We use parsley for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larger order was trying to do the same for his country" (Danticat 1998: 203). For an oppressed and persecuted people, language represents an empowering vehicle of identity formation and reaffirmation while providing the community with a voice of its own. Yet, language can also be brandished as a powerful token of domination by the oppressor, as it has usually been the case in the history of colonialism. In this novel Danticat clearly underscores the twofold nature of language. Although one word pronounced can bring about death, it is still "the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day, grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside" as Amabelle concludes (Danticat 1998: 266). The right to use one's language must be exercised against all odds, since "silence...is like sleep, a close second to death" (Danticat 1998: 13).

In her analysis of the Haitian Massacre, Michele Wucker refers to the historical whitewashing Trujillo and his men tried to achieve by offering a partial and manipulated version of history: "Trujillo's men were revising history to justify what he had done. His protege, Joaquin Balaguer, wrote that the massacre was 'the crystallization in the heart of our country of a sentiment of protest and defense against four centuries of Haitian depredations.' Grateful for this elegant defense, Trujillo made him, in 1960, the last of three puppet presidents" (Wucker 1998). This

is but one significant proof of the constructedness of history and the inherent partiality of its accounts. The two novels under study here have it as their main aim to revisit and revise historical records to introduce in them the formerly thwarted versions and voices of African American slaves and Haitian laborers. Giving voices to those who lacked them and giving life to the dead, inscribing them in the eternity of literary discourse, "rescuing them from the grave of time and inattention" (Morrison 1985: 593), is the best way to render justice to them.

3. MEMORY AND DREAMS

If, as Melvin Dixon aptly states, «Memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself» (1994: 19), Morrison and Danticat employ it in their novels as a necessary piece in their historical revisions. When dealing with the exploration of previously silenced (hi)stories and their inclusion in the literary discourse, Toni Morrison acknowledges the important role memory and imagination play in such revision:

> Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write...But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me. (1987: 111)

While Morrison explores "the psychic dimensions of American slavery" (Osagie 1994: 423), to ensure that the interior lives and suffering of slaves are not stories to forget about or «to pass on,» as she writes in *Beloved* (Morrison 1988: 274-275), Danticat takes it upon herself to fight against historical oblivion through narrative. As one of her characters puts it, "The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on. All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds, nor remain forever buried beneath the sod" (Danticat 1998: 266). The reliance on memory by Morrison and Danticat renders two non-linear novels where past and present are intertwined following a pendulum-like movement. Despite the selective nature of memory, "open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting" (Nora 1994: 285), those experiences and events which have been dismissed into oblivion often end up returning to the present, as it happens in *Beloved* and *TFOB*.

Despite Sethe's efforts "to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (Morrison 1988: 6), keeping the past "at bay" (Morrison 1988: 42), she is haunted by painful memories of things past and by her daughter's ghost, with whom she has multiple conversations: "Dearly Beloved, which is what you are to me...How bad is the scar?" (Morrison 1988: 184). However painful they are, the haunting ghosts of the past in the form of words flow into Sethe's mind as she talks to her dead child: "This is the first time I'm telling it and I'm telling it to you because it might help explain something to you although I know you don't need me to do it...You don't have to listen either, if you don't want to" (Morrison 1988: 193).

The killing of her own daughter is not the only episode that Sethe does not want to remember. Scenes of her slave days, such as her own rape, have equally been put aside. However, once the past has been opened up with the return of Beloved, those other memories appear as well in conversations with another former slave, Paul D: "I am full god damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, the book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that...I can't go back and add more..." (Morrison 1988: 70). In the conversations that Sethe has with Beloved's ghost, Paul D and herself, in the painful verbalization of the past, lies the key to recovery, since "[s]torytelling promotes healing...it creates catharsis" (Schmudde 1993: 134). At the end of the novel there is a reenactment or "antiverbal exorcism" (Brogan 1998: 91) of the baby's death when Mr. Bodwin, the white man who comes to take Sethe's fourth and youngest child to work, reminds the mother of cruel Schoolteacher back in her slave years. This time, however, the object of her attack is the white man and not her own daughter. Despite Sethe's reaction, or maybe because it was apparently intended to prevent Denver from being taken away, as a kind of repetition of the past, Beloved feels abandoned once again:

> Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling...Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding...running into...the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too...(Morrison 1988: 262)

By remembering and confronting Beloved and the circumstances that surrounded her death, Sethe finally manages to exorcise her ghost. After coming to terms with the past, remembering and retelling parts of it, Sethe ultimately comes to terms with herself. And Beloved finally disappears into a different kind of oblivion, once the act of remembering has been completed: "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for...they forgot her like a bad dream..." (Morrison 1988: 274). The verbal expression of memories enables Sethe to move from traumatic memory to "narrative memory" (Brogan 1998: 9), which implies the reshaping of the past through a reenactment or through storytelling. As Ashraf Rushdy aptly argues, "*Beloved* is the story that stops haunting when told, and stops being when disremembered, but must be remembered to be told, and must be told to be disremembered" (1990: 317).

In a similar manner, the use of memory in *TFOB* represents a crucial element in the revision of the Haitian Massacre. The sections in bold type that appear interspersed in the narrated events that surround the massacre reveal Amabelle's internal voice through dreams and memories of her past. Unlike Sethe, Amabelle consciously resorts to memory as a means of survival. Thus, she constantly imagines and remembers Sebastien, her lover who had disappeared in the massacre. Significantly enough, the novel begins with a direct reference to his name: "His name is Sebastien Onius" (Danticat 1998: 1). The inscription of Sebastien's name in Amabelle's story from the very beginning provides a sense of permanence and life that overrides the effects of death. As bell hooks reminds us when dealing with

the importance of names and naming, "a person never dies as long as their name is remembered, called" (1989: 166).

Many years after the Haitian genocide, Amabelle will walk into the Massacre River precisely in October, when the carnage had taken place, a ritual that triggers the spiritual re-birth of a foetus-like Amabelle:

> Unclothed, I slipped into the current. The water was warm for October, warm and shallow, so shallow that I could lie 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 relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow...me lying there, cradled by the current, paddling like a newborn in a washbasin... (Danticat 1998: 310)

Like Sethe, Amabelle goes through a revised reenactment of the past, which, together with her determination to "pass on" (Danticat 1998: 266) her story, implies the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory. As Brogan concludes, quoting Pierre Janet, "True memory...is essentially 'the action of telling a story'" (1998: 79).

The love Amabelle Desir and Beloved receive not only from their lovers, Sebastien and Halle, but also from their mothers, is finally truncated in both cases because of a premature and abrupt separation. This separation takes place either as a consequence of drowning or as the devastating effect of the injustice and violence of two horrendous historical episodes, namely slavery and the Massacre. Furthermore, Beloved and Amabelle share a painful feeling of abandonment by their mothers. In the first case, the root cause for the mother forsaking her daughter is to be found in the evils of slavery, which made slave mothers resort to such drastic ways out of their dehumanizing circumstances as killing or suicide. In her attempt to make herself loved by her mother Sethe, Beloved turns her desire into jealousy and possession, vying with Denver and Paul D for Sethe's attention and love, to the point of asserting:

> I AM BELOVED and she is mine...I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing...I see her face which is mine...her face comes through the water a hot thing her face is mine...I have to have my face...I am in the water and she is coming...I want to join...Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me...now we can join (Morrison 1988: 210, 212-13)

In the second case, Amabelle's desire to secure her mother's love recurs even in her dreams. Her narration of one of those dreams is strikingly similar to Beloved's vindication of the mother figure:

> In my sleep, I see my mother rising, like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her...Her face is like mine is now, in fact it is the exact same long, three-different-shades-of-night face, and she is smiling a both-rows-of-teeth

> revealing smile... "Why did you not love me then?"... "I will never be a whole woman," I say, "for the absence of your face." (Danticat 1998: 208)

The two passages tellingly revolve around the image of faces, which symbolizes both characters' constant yearning and search for their mothers. In their longing for motherly love and physical presence under the pain of forced separation, Beloved and Amabelle identify themselves with their absent mothers, whom they necessitate, since without them they are not complete.

Amabelle's recurrent dreams of her mother are complemented as it were by visions of the so called sugar woman. Interestingly enough, the account of these dreams bears, once again, important similarities with Beloved's reference to her mother as well as with Sethe's memories of her own mother:

> I dream of the sugar woman. Again...Around her face, she wears a shiny silver muzzle, and on her neck there is a collar with a clasped lock dangling from it...The sugar woman grabs her skirt and skips back and forth around my room. She seems to be dancing a kalanda in a very fast spin, locks arms with the air...As she swings and shuffles, the chains on her ankles cymbal a rattled melody. She hops to the sound of the jingle of the chains, which with her twists grows louder and louder... (Danticat 1998: 132)

In Morrison's novel it is precisely through music and dance that Sethe remembers her slave mother:

> Of that place where she was born...she remembered only song and dance...Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. (Morrison 1988: 30-31)

This time, Amabelle's dream includes an explicit reference to slavery in the presence of chains and the muzzle, which most probably alludes to the degrading bit used on slaves' mouths and which the sugar woman argues was given to her "a long time ago...so I'd not eat the sugarcane" (Danticat 1998: 132). Amabelle's obsession with faces comes to the foreground once again in the shape of a question: "'Is your face underneath this [mask]?' I ask" (Danticat 1998: 132). Upon uttering those words, Amabelle realizes that "The voice that comes out of my mouth...is the voice of the orphaned child at the stream" (Danticat 1998: 132). Judging from the obvious condition of slave of this unidentified woman whose face cannot be seen completely, and bearing in mind Sethe's references to her mother, it could be suggested that the sugar woman is Amabelle's grandmother or another female ancestor back in slavery times.[4]

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[4] Indeed the metaphor of the mask as a representation of the ancestors is also pointed out by Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka when referring to the "*masquerade*" or "cult of ancestors" as one of his people's traditions, where "the masquerader...is an ancestor" ("At Century's End" 1996: 58).

But the implications of the mask that appears in Amabelle's dreams go further than that suggested above. Dealing with the great relevance of masks in African art, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that:

> The mask, with its immobilized features all the while mobile, itself is a metaphor for dialectic—specifically, a dialectic or binary opposition embracing unresolved or potentially unresolvable social forms, notions of origins, or complex issues of value. Mask is the essence of immobility fused with the essence of mobility, fixity with transience, order with chaos, permanence with the transitory, the substantial with the evanescent....the mask effects the 'spiritual consolidation' of the race of a people, surely a fundamental aesthetic value in all of African art. (1987: 168).

Gates' analysis of the mask is in keeping with the "codes of meaning" created by slaves to communicate among themselves without being understood by their white masters as well as with African folklore components—culture and beliefs—which resisted the efforts of white slave holders to dispossess slaves of their cultural background. Uprooted from their homeland and in such a new and hostile environment, African slaves "were compelled not only to maintain their cultural heritage at a *meta* (as opposed to a material) level but also to apprehend the operative metaphysics of various alien cultures. Primary to their survival was the work of *consciousness*, of nonmaterial counterintelligence" (Baker 1991: 38). Spirituality and the preservation of part of their original culture were used by African slaves as a defense mechanism, a means of survival which allowed them not to succumb to enforced mental slavery and imprisonment. The reconciliation of binary opposites such as life/death, past/present, corporeal/spiritual, secular/sacred constitutes a defining trait of that original African culture. And the mask works as a metaphor for that harmonious coexistence of opposites, as Gates points out.

If we take into account the etymological origin of the word "mask" which, as Gates specifies, quoting Thass-Thienemann, comes from the Arabic *mas-chara*, "denoting the masked person, like a clown or buffoon—thus a live doll" (1987: 168), then we can establish further associations with *TFOB*. In one of Amabelle's dreams, her mother makes her a doll while she is sick in bed. At one point, she sees the doll rise and jump rope with her thread hairs while singing a song. Then the doll assures Amabelle with a "gentle, musical" voice: "You will be well again, ma belle Amabelle. I know this to be true" (Danticat 1998: 58). These are the same words uttered by Amabelle's mother in another dream followed by the phrase "You, my eternity" (Danticat 1998: 208), which, in turn, is also pronounced by the sugar woman (Danticat 1998: 133). If the moving doll of Amabelle's dreams is seen to represent a "masked person" (Gates 1987: 168) then it could arguably be equated with the masked sugar woman.

To conclude, it is necessary to notice the twofold use Morrison and Danticat make of memory and dreams. On the one hand, these two elements represent both a way to recover the past and a means by which the past and the ancestors can have access to the present. On the other hand, memory and dreams form part of the writers' subversive techniques which disrupt the narrative linearity prescribed by the

Western literary canon, as Singh, Skerrett and Hogan argue (1994: 19). By rescuing from oblivion the dreams and memories of those who did not have the opportunity to express themselves, *Beloved* and *TFOB* contribute to the creation of what Brian McHale terms «a posthumous discourse, a voice from beyond the grave» (1987: 230).

4. WATER IMAGERY

If the meaningful image of the mask evokes the reconciliation of binary oppositions, so does the powerful image of water, which pervades both *Beloved* and *TFOB*. Dealing precisely with the metaphor of water, Ann-Janine Morey argues that

> Women write about entering water willingly in order to dissolve, escape, and rethink the imprisoning boundaries governing conventional wisdom about male/female, natural/supernatural, self and other. In these fictions...all that we call solid and real is seen to be of illusory solidity. Crossing the margin of normality sends the characters into a condition I call *watertime*, a confluence of time and space in which all normal boundaries are suspended, in which the gods are dislocated, or redefined by an underwater perspective without necessarily being abolished or denied. In so doing, the writer affirms the ambiguous structures of representation. (1997: 248)

Water and water elements abound in both novels and are used by both authors in similar manners. A journey through the Atlantic Ocean called Middle Passage and two rivers, the Ohio and the Massacre, are the crucial settings for one and the other story. Interestingly enough, not only do both rivers act as dividers between two countries—Haiti and the Dominican Republic—and two states—Ohio and Kentucky—but they also represent the dividing—albeit simultaneously unifying—space between the living and the dead.[5] Whereas Beloved emerges from the waters of the Ohio River, the Massacre River witnesses the drowning of Amabelle's parents while at the same time it functions as a communal grave for the victims of the 1937 Massacre. These connotations of destruction and death are concomitant with the healing, life-giving quality of water as seen, for instance, in Amabelle Desir's final return to the river.

The Middle Passage stands as an infamous landmark in African American history, especially considering the number of slaves who perished on board the slave ships or committed suicide jumping into the ocean. The dreadful experience of this forced journey is narrated by Beloved in passages that deal with a mother whom she now identifies as Sethe:

> I am always crouching the man on my face is dead...I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink small rats do not wait for us to sleep

[5] When dealing with African religious beliefs, John S. Mbiti points out the sacred symbolism of rivers, lakes and waterfalls for some African peoples, who believe that «the spirits of the dead dwell there» (1991: 152).

> someone is thrashing but here is no room to do it in...the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine...the iron circle is around our neck...I am alone...Sethe's is the face that left me. (Morrison 1988: 210-13)

The fact that Beloved is constantly thirsty strengthens her metaphorical association with water:

> A fully dressed woman walked out of the water...everything hurt but her lungs most of all...Sethe's bladder filled to capacity...more like flooding the boat when Denver was born...there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now...The woman gulped water from a specked tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert. (Morrison 1988: 50-51)

The nurturing and life-giving connotations of the amniotic fluid coexist with the deathly implications of the Middle Passage water, a confluence that once again shows the blurring of boundaries between life and death represented in the water image.

This dual metaphor of destruction and nurture similarly dominates Danticat's novel. Whereas water reminds Amabelle of her parents' drowning, water images are also tokens of love, protection and immortality, all of which coalesce in the conch shell her lover gives her, "saying that in there flowed the sound fishes hear when they swim deep inside the ocean's caves" (Danticat 1998: 45). Upon the disappearance of her lover, Amabelle is left in a state of utter confusion about his whereabouts, her only hope residing in the embracing and healing nature of water: "Perhaps there was water to greet his last fall, to fold around him and embrace him like a feather-filled mattress...His name is Sebastien Onius and his spirit must be inside the waterfall cave at the source of the stream where the cane workers bathe..." (Danticat 1998: 282).

The reenactment of the past in the confluence of time and space that Morey's "watertime" suggests is one of the most striking coincidences in *TFOB* and *Beloved*, whose protagonists experience a final rebirth. In the first case, the protagonist's finally entering the river and welcoming the waters where her parents had drowned while trying to return to Haiti and consequently where "Every now and then...a swimmer finds a set of white spongy bones, a skeleton, thinned by time and being buried too long in the riverbed" (Danticat 1998: 308), represents a cathartic act of coming to terms with the past. In the second case, Sethe's instinctive attack on white Mr Bodwin, whose presence reminds her of Schoolteacher and his evil purposes, exorcises the ghosts of a past that had nonetheless to be remembered and dealt with in order to give it a final rest and proper burial. As Dona Richards states, «it is only through ritual that death can be understood as rebirth» (Richards 1981: 267).

On the other hand, Danticat's choice of a closing scene points to the "ambiguous structures of representation" Morey associates with "watertime" (1997: 248). Amabelle's re-union with the dead in the river could symbolize the exorcizing of her past and her ensuing spiritual re-birth, but the possibility of Amabelle's physical

death and total reunion with the river ghosts remains hanging in the closing pages, where images of death and life intermingle and merge and where Amabelle's questions about life and death remain unresolved:

> I thought that if I relived the moment often enough, the answer would become clear, that they [her parents] had wanted either for us all to die together or for me to go on living, even if by myself. I also thought that if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clearer sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has no memory. And soon, perhaps, neither will I. (Danticat 1998: 309)

In her final journey Amabelle is accompanied by the mad professor, a living victim of the Haitian Massacre whose insanity or spiritual death makes of him a "ghost with a smile on his face" (Danticat 1998: 309). He, like Amabelle, "was looking for the dawn" (Danticat 1998: 310), searching for a water eternity.

In a similar manner, despite Beloved's disappearance at the closing of the novel, the future looms peopled with the haunting ghosts of a past that, albeit remembered and exorcised, must not "pass on," as the book's final and ambiguous refrain suggests, referring both to oblivion and transmission. In keeping with Morey's concept of watertime, Mary P. Carden makes a concluding point when she argues that "Beloved reaches beyond linear historical narratives with beginning, middle, end. Her diffuse, multilayered, and unresolvable 'story' cannot be deployed to demonstrate national progress or to display African American recovery. Instead, she continues to haunt all locales of normalcy" (1999: 22).

5. CONCLUSION

Drawing from the postmodern revisionary impulse and also from the holistic and dialogic essence of African and African American cultures, Morrison and Danticat engage in a rewriting and revision of two historical episodes steeped in violence and racism. In their common deconstructive attempt, they resort to similar literary devices such as the use of dreams and visions, symbolism and metaphors, spirituality, and, above all, the power of memory, since "(re)membrance is activation in the face of stasis, a restoration of fluidity, translucence, and movement" (Holloway 1992: 68). Fluidity, translucence and movement are all characteristics of water, an element that functions as the main and probably most compelling metaphor of both novels. Water represents precisely the inappropriateness of fixed borders, static monolithic realities and one-dimensional worlds, advocating instead the idea of a dialogic multiplicity as well as the presence of unconventional open world views. It is in that kind of world that must always remain a place for the memories of those who perished unjustly, victims of racial genocide. Through their characters, *Beloved* and *TFOB* inscribe in the permanence of literary discourse the stories of those victims providing them with some kind of name and identity, since "It is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air" (Danticat 1998: 282).

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