

PRECARITY AND HEALING: ON THE ROLE OF GRIEF IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *THE FARMING OF BONES* (1998)

ÁGNES ZSÓFIA KOVÁCS¹

Article history: Received 9 February 2022; Revised 20 April 2022; Accepted 3 May 2022; Available online 30 June 2022; Available print 30 June 2022.

©2022 Studia UBB Philologia. Published by Babeş-Bolyai University.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial- NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

ABSTRACT. *Precarity and Healing: On the Role of Grief in Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones (1998).* Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) is a fictional account of the undocumented Parsley massacre of 1937, when black Haitian migrant workers were killed by Rafael Trujillo's government in the Dominican Republic. The paper places the novel in the African diasporic tradition of writing about the traumatic past, with the Parsley massacre being one such traumatic event of Haitian diasporic writing. The paper highlights the critical problem that unlike most post-colonial fiction, this Haitian diasporic story about gaining voice and agency fails to provide a satisfactory therapeutic valence or an explanation for individual suffering. The paper proposes an application of Judith Butler's concept of precarity in order to reconsider the problem of healing the wounds of the past in Danticat's novel. For Butler, social relationality makes subjects vulnerable within the social structure they inhabit, but this vulnerability may also carry a potentiality for the experience of social vulnerability to be shared in makeshift acts of solidarity. The paper claims that precarity does have a limited potential in the novel, which can be detected through the analysis of the water imagery. Amabelle Désir, the protagonist, is already living a precarious life before the Parsley massacre, but the brutality to which she is subjected isolates her socially even more afterwards. She is unable to bear her testimony, living in the past, mourning her lost lover. The representation of precarity in the novel's water imagery indicates that making contact with her former employer in 1961 brings a momentary sense of

¹ **Ágnes Zsófia KOVÁCS** is associate professor at the Department of American Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary. Her research interests include late nineteenth-century proto-modern fiction, conversions of literary modernisms, popular fiction genres, and contemporary multicultural American fiction. Her current research into travel writing involves re-mapping travel texts by Edith Wharton. She has published extensively on Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Toni Morrison, see her homepage at <https://ieas-szeged.academia.edu/%C3%81gnesZs%C3%B3fiaKov%C3%A1cs>. Email: akovacs@lit.u-szeged.hu.

connection and community that enables her to commit suicide eventually. This element of truncated healing can be read as the limited potential of precarity available in the Haitian diasporic context.

Keywords: *Edwidge Danticat, Toni Morrison, Judith Butler, Haitian diasporic women's writing history, empowerment, healing, precarity, grief*

REZUMAT. Precaritate și vindecare: despre rolul deplângerii în *The Farming of Bones (1998)* de Edwidge Danticat. *The Farming of Bones (1998)* de Edwidge Danticat e o relatare ficțională a masacrului din Parsley, rămas nedocumentat, unde în 1937 muncitori haitieni migranți au fost uciși de guvernul lui Rafael Trujillo în Republica Dominicană. Lucrarea plasează romanul în tradiția diasporică africană a scriiturii despre trecutul traumatic, masacrul din Parsley fiind un asemenea eveniment traumatic în literatura diasporică haitiană. Studiul evidențiază problema critică a faptului că, spre deosebire de majoritatea ficțiunilor post-coloniale, această poveste diasporică haitiană a găsirii unei voci și a unei posibilități de acțiune nu reușește să furnizeze o valență terapeutică satisfăcătoare sau o explicație a suferinței individuale. Lucrarea propune aplicarea conceptului de precaritate al lui Judith Butler pentru a repune în discuție problema vindecării rănilor trecutului în romanul lui Danticat. Pentru Butler, relaționarea socială face subiecții vulnerabili în structura socială pe care o populează, însă această vulnerabilitate poate avea și un potențial, în sensul că experiența vulnerabilității sociale poate fi împărtășită în acte improvizate de solidaritate. Lucrarea afirmă că precaritatea are un potențial limitat în roman, fapt ce poate fi detectat prin analiza imaginilor apei. Amabelle Désir, protagonistă, trăiește o viață precară deja înainte de masacrul din Parsley, însă brutalitatea la care este supusă o izolează social și mai mult ulterior. Ea nu este în stare să-și aducă mărturia, trăiește în trecut, deplângându-și iubitul mort. Reprezentarea precarității în imaginile apei din roman indică faptul că luând legătura cu fostul ei angajator în 1961 îi provoacă eroinei un sentiment trecător de conexiune și comunitate care îi permite să se sinucidă în cele din urmă. Acest element de vindecare trunchiată poate fi interpretat ca potențial limitat al precarității disponibil în contextul diasporic haitian.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Edwidge Danticat, Toni Morrison, Judith Morrison, Judith Butler, istoria literaturii diasporice haitiene, empowerment, vindecare, precaritate, deplângere*

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” (Toni Morrison, 1993 “Nobel Lecture,” quoted in Danticat 2017, 15)

In African diasporic women's rewritings of history previously untold wounds of the past get articulated. As female protagonists begin to find their voices to narrate their past suffering, a healing process emerges: female characters

who learn to share their painful stories with their community of women experience a gradual empowerment. Since the 1980s, Toni Morrison's name and work have become hallmarks for this kind of active imaginative engagement with the traumatic past of African Americans. As we all know, Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) tells an imaginative story of a fugitive slave mother, who murders her child to prevent her from being recaptured into slavery. The subsequent return of the murdered girl's ghost exerts a powerful influence on both the literary and critical afterlives of the topic (Morrison 1987 and 1995). Ashraf H. Rushdy, the author of *The Neo-slave narrative* (Rushdy 1999b), reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through the slave mother's two daughters - one dead, one a survivor. The two daughters are "signifyin(g)" basic relationships to history in their relationships to the mother, Rushdy claims: the dead one has returned to take revenge for her lost life while the survivor learns about the past in order to move on and reconstruct her own life. The two represent two sides of an ambivalent relation to the past, "the unforgiving way" and "the loving way," as Rushdy puts it (1992, 583). These two ways also stand for the binary means of handling the wounds of the past and it is the forgiving way that leads to healing.²

In African diasporic fiction the transmission of wounds and the healing are often played out in the mother-daughter relationship, but similarly to the case of *Beloved*, healing is not always fully accomplished. Caroline Rody's *African American and Caribbean Women Rewriting History* interprets the mother-daughter relationship as the allegory of the urge to return to history. Rody claims that the return to history provides extra sources of imaginative power for the colored daughter-narrators. While Rody contends that the daughter's return can be both creative and lethal, in either case her focus is on the "fantastic figure of the revisionary "daughter," who, transcending time in a quest to contact lost, enslaved foremothers, embodies the newly born power of feminist reimagination" (Rody 2001, 4). For her, these novels³ recreate the voices of socially marginalized persons in order to produce new versions of the African American and Caribbean past through the stories they tell.

² Rushdy's book covers William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and his *Middle Passage* (1990) surveying fictional representations of African American history that reimagine the genre of the slave narrative, often involving representational modes of African cultural origin (see also Gilroy 1993, Eckstein 2006 and Kovács 2021).

³ Rody discusses Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). As a complement, Rita B. Dandridge analyzes historical romances as political acts by African American women authors. Her analysis extends to Anita Richmond Bunkley's *Emily, the Yellow Rose* (1989) and *Black Gold* (1995), Beverly Jenkins' *Night Song* (1994), *Vivid* (1995), *Indigo* (1996), *Through the Storm* (1998), Francine Craft's *The Black Pearl* (1996), Gay G. Gunn's *Nowhere to Run* (1997), and Shirley Hailstock's *Clara's Promise* (1995).

In Haitian diasporic literature the project of telling about previously censored accounts of the past also connotes a sense of resistance to silencing, and possibly healing. Edwidge Danticat identifies as one of her own artistic “creation myths” or haunting stories the execution of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin in 1964, who had returned from their US exile to fight against the Duvalier regime and were caught and killed. Their return from the diaspora “involves a disobeyed directive from a higher authority and a brutal punishment as a result” (Danticat 2017, 6), like an Adam and Eve banishment story. Danticat understands the writer’s and the reader’s role as a similar resistance to oppression: “[r]eading, like writing, under these conditions is disobedience to a directive in which the reader, our Eve, already knows the possible consequences of eating that apple but takes a bold bite anyway” (10). Part of this creation myth is the issue of death that she has been writing about continually (15). In 2017, having witnessed her mother’s death, she thinks of death “like moving from one place to another, [...] a more permanent tenement or town” (33).

Edwidge Danticat’s second book *The Farming of Bones* (1998) belongs to the afterlife of Morrison’s *Beloved* in that it contemplates forms of racialized subjugation and death. However, the book does not represent slavery as the main cause of past grievances. Instead, it focuses on the story of the 1937 Parsley massacre that “has become a significant new source of trauma for the Haitian collective psyche” (Munro 2006, 83). The book tells the story of a politically motivated massacre as an act of resistance. Inspired by Morrison’s example, where the suffering of a group is represented through one documented person’s imaginative story, Danticat’s narrative of one survivor’s life (Munro 2006, 83) exposes the horrors of the Parsley massacre in which cc. 30.000 Haitian citizens were murdered in Trujillo’s Dominican Republic. Yet in contrast with Morrison’s representation in *Beloved*, Danticat prefers not to conceal the murder (Danticat 2017, 71), rather, she elucidates its diverse horrendous ways. Amabelle, the heroine and narrator survives the massacre and escapes to Haiti, but she heals in a very limited way. She becomes physically and emotionally restricted for decades after her escape from the Dominican Republic. She lives a “living death” among her memories and the ghosts of the past: she bears no daughter, and remains silent about her experiences. Her emotional healing begins as a reaction to Trujillo’s assassination in 1961, and it materializes in the form of revisiting sites of her traumatized past and in the telling of her story. However, the travel and the act of telling leave her isolated and she commits suicide by the frontier river between Haiti and Dominique eventually.

Commentators usually point out an optimistic spirit in the book. Danticat herself writes in her “Afterword” that it is “about starting all over—or trying to—and ultimately, I hope, about coming to terms with history” (Danticat 1998b,

317). Rohrleitner sees “a glimpse of redemption” (2011, 75) in the story that she attributes directly to an optimistic political atmosphere in Haiti thanks to the reinstatement in office of Jean-Baptiste Aristide, the democratically elected president, in 1994 after a military coup in 1991.

Danticat's representation of Amabelle's experience and survival has also been read as part of the Haitian diasporic imaginary, and this account also presents an optimistic view of the novel. Nadège Clitandre defines the diasporic imaginary as a site where “the work of imagination and fantasy entails the project of transgressing all forms of borders [...] to produce new language and alternative knowledge, hybrid, multiple, and dialogic forms of communication that unsettle the rhetoric of nationalism” (2018, 140). Clitandre focuses on the process of linguistic hybridization (145) in the novel through which several voices contribute to telling the story, not only through voices of several characters but also through voices of ghosts and both third-person and first-person narration focalized through the same character. For Clitandre, Amabelle's and Sebastien's first-person narrations represent their consciousness of the insider, while their third person narrations represent their consciousness of the outsider (2018, 149 and 2001, 36) Clitandre locates the hybridity of the text in the linguistic representation of “double consciousness” of colonial and neo-colonial subjects (2018, 149) which in an earlier work she called the “narrative strategy of otherness” (2001, 35-6). The insider position allows Haitians to “use the imagination to redefine and reconstitute themselves despite continued subjugation” (31). The story of healing for Clitandre, then, is to be understood as one narrative among the many available ones about the neocolonial experience, and not the final one.⁴

The lack of a clear story of healing in the novel has been explained by Martin Munro by historical reasons, as a typically Haitian approach to postcolonial enterprise. Munro points out the difference between the more positive view of earlier Haitian accounts of the massacre and Danticat's barren representation: “[t]he sterility of Danticat's Amabelle-Yves couple can be contrasted with Jacques Roumain's Manuel and Annaïse in *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944), in that Roumain's lovers bring forth life, and a new flow of water, while Danticat's couple, in their unique, fruitless copulation, only reinforce the barrenness of

⁴ Sylvia Martinez-Falquina uses the term ambivalence to describe the “diasporic” (Danticat 2010, 50) condition in Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* (Martinez 2015, 13). The ambivalence involves both “the telling of horrors” and “the restoration of a balanced relationship to the landscape that differs from and resists colonial and neocolonial representations” (13). Again, the idea of doubleness surfaces in Martinez' analysis of the “tidalectic” (17) rhythm between representing wounds, separation, and grief on the one hand and an optimistic possibility of healing on the other – this time in Danticat's cycle of stories.

their traumatized lives” (Munro 2006, 88). Moreover, Amabelle is unable to testify and break her silence, and it is only in her dreams that she talks about her experience, even if silence for Amabelle indicates insubordination. Yet, “in Danticat’s narrative there is no clearly empowering, literal move out of silence and into voice or agency”, Munro writes, possibly due to the prolonged and immediate nature Haitian traumas that set the country apart from other Caribbean nations (92).

As part of the literature on Haitian diasporic women’s rewriting history, this paper sets out to compare representations of the traumatic experience and healing in Danticat’s novel about the Parsley massacre in order to address the notion of healing represented in the text. I argue that there is a need to reconsider the notion of healing as an impossible counterpoint to getting wounded or denigrated. Instead, healing is conceptualized here as a process. I have chosen the critical discussion on precarity in literature as a method for a procedural approach to healing. More specifically, I am interested in the *potential* the notions of precarity and grief may offer in discussing literary representations of healing in Haitian diasporic women’s writing.

According to Judith Butler, precarity is a general condition of vulnerability to which any subject is exposed to by the social and political structure s/he is situated in. This socially conditioned vulnerability is physically based (Butler 2004, 27), but it can be psychic, emotional, institutional as well, often appearing against one’s self-professed notion of autonomy in situations when one finds oneself out of one’s “self” (27). For instance, grief can be a time when “one undergoes something out of control and finds that one is beside oneself” (27). However, for Butler vulnerability can also form the basis of new communities for forging new kinds of social and political communities based on the common experience of vulnerability of the precarious subjects. In literary studies, papers on representations of precarity question how new concepts of community may be shown and formed in texts, and whether and how various experiences of vulnerability provide a chance for new social or political connections. Such new concepts of community discussed include social institutions like family and marriage.

The notion of precarity as a social condition, being the source of a potential solidarity, provides a new perspective on the reevaluation of the problematic nature of healing in *The Farming of Bones*. The concept of precarity collapses the binary between trauma and healing and provides a procedural model, in which healing appears as a possible function of vulnerable conditions. The specific example of the heroine’s healing process in Danticat’s novel provides a chance to examine what possible new communities and bonds may be formed among Haitian and Dominican women who survived or experienced the Parsley

massacre. Experiences of physical and institutional vulnerability abound in the novel, while the narrative can be read as an obituary for the narrator's lost love, a document of lifelong grief. The narrator reaches out to other survivors and eventually to witnesses of her own tragic past. I suggest that we look into how precarity and grief intersect in scenarios of healing in Danticat's novel. My aim is to find out what sort of healing one can think about in the novel, if healing is conceptualized as the possible potential element of the experience of precarity.

Representing precarity in literature

The notion of precarity has become a popular critical framework in literary studies in the past decades, mainly in reactions to the publication of Judith Butler's *Precarious Lives* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009). In *Precarious Lives* Butler discusses repercussions of Holocaust survivor Emmanuel Lévinas's ethical philosophy of personal responsibility in the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Butler 2004, 139 and Rushing 2015, 67). Butler considers how one's social relatedness includes an essential physical vulnerability that is also part of being "human" (Butler 2004, 42-3) and critiques ways in which the neoliberal state produces the condition of precarity (Butler 2009 and 2015). Forming part of this overarching interest, studies on literature usually showcase representations of precarious lives and the condition of precarity in literature.

For Butler, a life of precarity means the possible vulnerability of any subject in a neoliberal social structure, an essential condition. Any social subject is part of larger social systems that influence its life dramatically, so it is vulnerable to them (Butler 2004, 27). Vulnerability can be downright physical in not being able to control or defend one's own body against an aggressor or aggressors, but being interconnected with others often takes effect on more abstract, institutional, economic or psychological, levels one is not necessarily aware of. Grief is an example of this sense of implicit personal-emotional and also social vulnerability to others: you mourn the person who had some relation to you that has become part of you, you find yourself out of control in grief (23), and although you hope you get back to normal after it is over, basically you will be a different person because of the loss of the other (21-22). So grief reveals a powerful social connection which affects and shapes (23).

This essential vulnerability constitutes what Butler calls a "common human vulnerability" (31), yet some lost human lives will not seem grievable. Butler enumerates instances in which civilian deaths in war are not seen as grievable by the media of the enemy forces (Butler 2004, 34-7 and 2009), which poses the problem of how dehumanizing works. Dehumanization, for Butler, happens in "a refusal of discourse that produces dehumanization" (Butler 2004,

36). However, theoretically, the condition of vulnerability of the subject in its social relationality entails a *possibility* for connection with other vulnerable subjects because of the shared experience of vulnerability, so vulnerability has a possible ethical and even political aspect (Lloyd 2015, 178). As Butler writes: “[n]ot only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized [...], but when a vulnerability is recognized, the recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself.” (Butler 2004, 43) This is the possibility precarity entails: for Butler and Lorey the condition of vulnerability may become a possible non-necessary basis for creating new *social* and *political* connections and communities (Butler 2015, viii and Lorey 2015, 9).⁵

Let us see how the concept of precarity has been used in reading literature and whether any change in the meaning and structure of vulnerability, as Butler would put it, may be detected through these uses. Simon During proposed to place the humanities and the study of literature in the context of precarious lives in the neoliberal state. During argues that precarity is a phenomenon the humanities must accept, not debate: “the humanities need to adapt to and accept their relation both to social and metaphysical precariousness” (During 2015, 55). He thinks that even so, literary study can provide a genealogy of the neoliberal state, “articulate historical ways in which material precarity intersected with literary and existential precariousness” (55).⁶

In actual interpretive essays, a focus on the condition of precarity varies from being a tool for catalogue to being a tool for theoretical reflection. It may mean the study of the narrative devices that create a sense of fragmentation, confusion, anxiety, and involvement of the reader to generate affect. As an example of this, Ngumbi explores the anxieties around the emergence of a new community: the reworkings of the notion of family for migrants in Tanzania in contemporary literature (Ngumbi 2019, 66-7). Accounting for readerly anxieties in

⁵ See for instance the 2021 RINGS conference at CEU, Hungary, about ‘Forging New Solidarities’ as one such act: <https://events.ceu.edu/index.php/2021-10-25/rings-conference-forging-new-solidarities-networks-academic-activism-and-precarity> However, the idea of the potential of precarity has also been challenged on two counts, as Hogg and Simonsen show. One direction charts the vast differences of precarious experience that do not allow for sharing (Hogg and Simonsen 2021, 2). The other argues that “any attempt to find potential in precarity can be understood as a simple capitulation to neoliberal ideology” (2), a co-option of resistance.

⁶ Briony Lipton resists During’s attitude of adaptation to precarity in academia from a gender studies perspective. She claims the academic in neoliberal universities is the model of the precarious subject, and moreover, precarity is gendered in higher education (Lipton 2015, 64). She appropriates Janet Newman’s theorizations of ‘spaces of power’ as a possible counter-response to precarity in the humanities. Lipton uses Newman’s framework to showcase how “feminist academics find and create spaces for activism and resistance within the neoliberal university” (Lipton 2015, 65-6; Newman 2013, 202).

a different way, Jago Morrison surveys narrative devices that channel reader's affective responses in Trezza Azzopardi's *Remember me* (Morrison 2013, 16).

Another way to rely on the term in literary analysis is to survey how literary representations use specific motifs that illustrate precarious conditions and connections. In their excellent essay referred to above, Hogg and Simonsen explore literary representations of the potential of precarity in drama and autobiography. They analyze Chris Dunkley's drama *The Precariat* (2013) and Amy Liptrot's memoir *The Outrun* (2016) in order to argue that in both texts the motifs that first evoke feelings of vulnerability will eventually also suggest potential connections between people (Hogg 2021, 25). In the drama, the device with the double association is digital media, whereas in the memoir, images of birds and falling invoke new fragmented forms of sociability.

Based on the above examples, in literary studies of precarity the question is whether one can highlight aesthetic representations of actual vulnerabilities through which new notions of communal experience may emerge.

Survival and healing as precarity in *The Farming of Bones*

I would like to propose the idea that the potential precarious lives possess for Butler and Lorey can be related to the process of healing, which has been widely discussed in African and Haitian diasporic women's fictional representations of history, and which we have seen in the reception of Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* as well. Moreover, I suggest that we look into how precarity and grief intersect in scenarios of healing in Danticat's novel as processes of social relationality.

The Farming of Bones presents a fictional account of injustice and healing, with characters who live precarious lives. The novel tells the story of the Parsley massacre of the Trujillo regime in the Republic of Dominique in 1937. The aim of the actual massacre was to whiten the population (Danticat 1998c, 321) by exterminating illegal black Haitian guest workers in the border area between Haiti and Dominique. The massacre was never officially acknowledged: the army was deployed and was ordered to clear traces, and there are no public records of it available. In the novel, the story is told from the personal and intimate perspective of a female survivor (Danticat 1998c, 319), decades after the events. I would like to argue that the heroine's story can be read as a literary tale of precariousness and partial healing. So first, let us look at the story of Amabelle's bodily vulnerability, grief, and healing, in order to be able to reconsider the *representations* and the extent of the healing process in the water imagery afterwards.

Amabelle, the protagonist, lives the life of a socially invisible person already before the massacre happens. She is an orphan. Her Haitian parents were healers, who drowned crossing the river between Haiti and Dominique in a sudden torrential rain and flood. Don Ignazio found Amabelle by the river on the Dominican side where she witnessed the death of her parents. The Don took Amabelle in as domestic help, and she eventually became his daughter's maid. By 1937, Amabelle is a young woman and the only thing she has is another displaced Haitian, her lover Sebastien - a cane worker from the neighboring sugarcane plantation. They plan to marry. She has healer qualities and skills, and helps her mistress give birth to twins. Trouble starts when one of Sebastian's friends, Joël, is killed by the husband of Amabelle's mistress, Senor Pico, and there is no legal action taken to punish the culprit. It is only Joël's father, Kongo, the leader of the cane workers, who mourns his son by preparing a death mask and a burial. Kongo is privately offered wood for the coffin by Don Ignazio, Pico's father-in-law, but there is no acknowledgement of responsibility, let alone guilt, by Senor Pico himself. So already before the actual massacre, Haitian workers live a precarious life in which they are vulnerable, even exterminable and ungrievable. The cane and domestic workers make up the socially vulnerable precariat of the Dominican neocolonial state.

The delicate equilibrium of Amabelle's precarious life is shattered by the Parsley massacre even more. The first warning arrives when she is offered a job at a border clinic as a midwife by the family doctor. Dr Javier informs her of the impending killings and that he and local priests have arranged for trucks to transport fleeing Haitians to the border. Amabelle tells Sebastien and his sister about the possibility and the three decide to flee together on the trucks. Amabelle arrives late to the meeting place where she witnesses Dominican soldiers detain the trucks and brutalize passengers and organizers alike. The head of her family, Senor Pico, leads the soldiers' attack on the civilians. She starts out for the border on foot across the hills at once, accompanied by Sebastien's one remaining friend from the fields, Yves, and some other refugees. They reach the border town where they can cross the river to Haiti, but they are identified as Haitians and are beaten brutally. Only two of the group escape to cross the river, Amabelle and Yves. Amabelle strangles the woman she crosses the river with by accident when she tries to stifle her shouting, which would have revealed them to their pursuers.

After the escape, Amabelle's healing process remains incomplete. First, she spends months at a refugee camp, where she is unable to talk because of her broken jaw, and is unable to move because of her ruined knee; her body and voice function as sites of oppression (Clitandre 2001). She receives no compensation for the atrocities, her name is not even recorded by the official ordered to prepare

a list of victims, and she is not allowed to testify. Her physical recuperation remains partial as well, her hair does not grow back properly, her jaw is displaced, her teeth are cracked, and she has a limp and a ring in the ear. After the camp, she and Yves join his family. Yves's mother takes them in as a couple, but they cannot maintain a relationship even after Amabelle learns from eye-witnesses that Sebastien and his sister were killed by soldiers. Both Amabelle and Yves suffer from survivors' guilt, and their sexual connection brings no relief. They barely talk to each other, never mention the fleeing and the refugee camp they experienced together. They construct separate lives. He plants and harvests, prospers and drinks. She has physical difficulty moving around, so she takes up sewing for women in the community. No cooperation, child, or joint plan fits into this relationship, yet Amabelle and Yves maintain their barren partnership till old age because of their shared past.

Problems of healing are also linked to changing senses of "family" in the novel, which seems particularly emptied out. Amabelle's family relations have been wiped out by the death of her parents. Her employer's family replaces her own real one, then her connection to Sebastien becomes her main relation of kinship. The massacre destroys that as well, so she resolves to not connect with Sebastien's mother back in Haiti, as she had never met before, but goes to live with Yves, having survived together. This pragmatic partnership fulfils some functions of a marriage relationship: primarily economic ones, not reproductional or psychological ones. Throughout the story, Amabelle finds herself in makeshift family arrangements that eventually prove less than satisfactory and that play a part in her incomplete physical and psychological healing.

It is only when Amabelle gets old that her healing seems to speed up. Trujillo is killed, his regime ends. She revisits Father Romain, one of the priests who had organized the evacuation of Haitians from the border areas to safe territory. He was arrested and tortured after the massacre, and he was lucky to return from prison even if in a mentally confused condition. Amabelle had met him after his release from prison and witnessed his total emotional and mental confusion, his repetition of Dominican propaganda (Clitandre 2018, 151; 2001, 37; Munro 2006, 87-88). Years later she realizes that the Father has been transformed into a father in lower case: he left the order, married and has three sons to care about, being unable to perform his earlier mission of handling the needs of a bigger community, but needing the comfort of a small group to be able to master his fears. He sets an example for Amabelle, providing an attempt at negotiating her own physical and emotional disability in a new, downsized, but manageable way.

Amabelle's healing is also indicated by her emerging narrative about Sebastien. The act of telling a story about their time together, about the massacre

and about her “survival” is rooted in Amabelle’s mourning and grief for Sebastien, who did not survive. He disappeared and there is no official information about him or a grave to visit, therefore he is not to be mourned for. Amabelle begins telling the account of the massacre so that Sebastien will be remembered in a story, if in no other way. As the narrator concludes: “men with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (Danticat 1988, 280). Amabelle’s repetition of Sebastien’s name and story prevents him from being officially forgotten.

The telling of Sebastien’s story also relates Amabelle’s shifting social positions and attitudes to vulnerability in the sense of Butler’s relationality. That is why Amabelle’s story starts with an invocation and an acknowledgement. “His name is Sebastien Onius.” -- runs the first sentence, in a reference to Sebastien’s ghost in the present. The ghost appears in a nightmare, and Amabelle is quick to acknowledge that the nightmare about the past is better than her life in the present: “It’s either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I’ve become.” (2) Indeed, 15 of the 41 chapters of the text are in bold and describe nightmares in the present, while the rest recount past events, the locus of linguistic hybridity as Clitandre sees it (2018, 145), the only available way for Amabelle’s fragmented testimony, as Munro contends (2006, 91). Amabelle’s life has been changed by the massacre. Yet it is important to spell out that in terms of vulnerability her life has been changed most by one aspect: the absence of Sebastien. In this way, the act of writing not only serves to represent Sebastien, but also the past in which Amabelle had a different position of social relatedness than in the present.

The massacre shattered Amabelle’s past relationality and the ensuing official silence about the events foreclosed her actual processing of the loss and displaced it into the realm of dreams. It is the act of telling that creates a memory of Sebastien and also a mark of Amabelle’s loss, complete with an awareness of the artificiality of the act of telling. The narrator comments: “Perhaps there was no story that could truly satisfy. I myself didn’t know if that story was true or even possible, but as the senora had said, there are many stories. And mine too is only one.” (Danticat 1988, 303) For Amabelle, telling the story of the past enumerates the reasons for her wish to die, makes her articulate an awareness of her own vulnerability and mourning, and eventually helps her make a decision. As the narrator tells the ghost:

‘Sebastien, the slaughter showed me that life can be a strange gift,’ I say.
 ‘Breath, like glass is always in danger. I chose a living death because I am not brave. ... Two mountains can never meet, but perhaps you and I can meet again. I am coming to your waterfall’ (Danticat 1988, 281).

Her visit to the waterfall and the border river indicates a readiness on her part to close down the narration and her life as well. The precarious conditions of Amabelle's life before the massacre have intensified after it. Her grief for Sebastien after the massacre pushed her further into a kind of social death with limited social relations and only a semblance of a family, and her healing remained very restricted because of her poor social relationality. In what follows, let us look at the metaphorical representations of the potential of precarity in the novel, as it sheds further light on the process of healing in the novel.

The representation of precarity and the role of grief in *The Farming of Bones* via the water imagery

Earlier on, Hogg and Simonsen's analysis of images of birds and falling in Liptrot's memoir has been referred to briefly. Simonsen shows how these images shift meaning in the course of the memoir to finally indicate the possibility of a limited sociability for the protagonist (Hogg and Simonsen 2021, 25). Also, Martin Munro referred to the importance (and different roles) of the water imagery both in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* and in Danticat's novel (Munro 2006, 88). In this section I argue that representations of water are connected to Amabelle's experience of vulnerability and grief throughout the novel. The water imagery is also related to problems of the healing process, to anxieties that cannot be eliminated or forgotten, despite Amabelle's return to her former mistress across the border river. Yet, the visit allows for temporary local solidarities among women.

Key scenes of the novel are connected to crossing the boundary river. Immersion in water or crossing a river is usually associated with the idea of being cleansed or starting anew: the text modifies these associations. First, Amabelle crosses the river with her parents who die on the way back, leaving her alone in Dominique. For her, this is the end of her biological family and training as a healer. Second, she saves her skin swimming through the river to Haiti during the massacre. She is broken in body, kills a woman to be able to escape, while the crossing does not bring her a rebirth or an opening up, but a crisis. Thirdly, she crosses the river by car to meet her former mistress, Valencia. They manage to reconnect and Amabelle turns back to the river feeling she has no unfinished business left in Dominique. Moreover, the final scene of the novel takes place at the border river, too: Amabelle does not return to the city by car, but wades into the shallows of the river. The novel ends with her lying naked in the water in a fetal position. At the end of the story there is no more crossing of the river but an immersion in it. Can this indicate a relaxed new attitude or

healing in the protagonist? Chances of change in the future seem vague: Amabelle is old, scarred, feeble, without kin: she is more likely preparing to die than to heal.

Another water related image is the waterfall by the Dominican house that represents her connection to others. First of all, it relates to her bond with Sebastien. The couple loved the waterfall, and the grotto behind the wall of the water was their special meeting place away from others. Then, during her visit to Dominique as an old woman, Amabelle is first looking for the waterfall among the new houses, because she hopes Sebastine's "spirit must be inside the waterfall cave" (Danticat 1988, 280) and she can dream him "to listen" (280). When she is unable to find the waterfall and the cave, she begins to look for Senora Valencia's place. Senora Valencia does not recognize Amabelle first, and when she does, she begins to explain her own losses: the death of her baby son, her illness, and her attempt to hide people at the time of the massacre. She makes no apologies for her husband's murderous acts. She only tells about their separate lives in marriage; her lack of ability to leave the country because then she should have left her old father and her daughter and the graves of her mother and son, too. Valencia's vulnerability does not relate to Amabelle's vulnerability at all, as the visitor feels she had made her journey in vain.

However, when on impulse Valencia drives Amabelle to the waterfall where she fell in love with Sebastian, they do reconnect briefly. Valencia is able to comment on their shared past while watching the waterfall. Valencia says:

"When we were children, you were always drawn to water, Amabelle, stream, lakes, rivers, waterfalls in all their power, do you remember?" I did. "When I didn't see you, I always knew where to find you, peeking into some current, looking for your face. Since then I can't tell you how many streams and rivers and waterfalls I have been to, looking for you."
(300-301)

At this point Amabelle finally understands Valencia's sadness and feelings of loss. She knows she herself was expecting Sebastien to appear at the waterfall, but he did not: "Sebastien, I could not find. He did not come out and show himself. He stayed inside the waterfall" (304). So by the waterfall Amabelle could not make up for her loss of Sebastien, but she could at least share Valencia's sense of loss and waiting in vain as similar to her isolation and barrenness.

In addition, Valencia's maid, Sylvie, also shares the other two women's moment of grief at the waterfall. She has rope burns on her neck, a sign of being a survivor of the massacre herself. At the waterfall, Sylvie asks the other two a question: "Why parsley?" (301). She was a child at the time of the killings and

she had never been given an explanation of the reasons. Senora Valencia hid her and then kept her as a maid but they have never talked about the experience since. So Sylvie is actually asking "Why kill so many?" from the perspective of the next generation. Amabelle and Valencia know that they do not have a proper explanation, only makeshift stories and their sense of grief to share with Sylvie, who seems a version of young Amabelle, vulnerable and not comprehending.

In sum, the possibility to be cleansed by water, to start anew by crossing a river or emerge from a water cave intact are challenged by the images in the text. The water imagery represents the current state of Amabelle's basic relations to others. It resonates with Amabelle's experiences of vulnerability and confined social connection. The crossings of the border river are fearful and deadly experiences, not new beginnings. The waterfall changes from being a love nest into just a place of temporary connection and grief, that allows for impulsive, chance, and fragmentary affective connections among victimized women.

Conclusion

I suggest that it is easier to understand the "ambiguous" or incomplete sense of healing in Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* if we consider it through Judith Butler's concept of "the potential of precarity." This means that the act of healing is not thought of in itself, but as a mode of operation of the social networks that produce a subject. In this sense, the potential for healing lies in the social communities this subject belongs to. In the novel, Amabelle is a vulnerable precarious social subject already before the massacre, but she becomes painfully aware of her own vulnerable lack of social relatedness after the massacre. The family appears as the most reliable but fragmented community of Amabelle's precarious life that may harbor a potential, but it proves to be a fruitless, barren enterprise that is unable to help her emotionally. The water imagery of the text represents the breakdown of Amabelle's family connections, it gives space to temporal and fragile affective connections with other victims of the massacre instead. Healing itself is represented as an incomplete and unsatisfactory process dependent on Amabelle's social relationality. In the novel, healing becomes functional only temporarily, at the waterfall. After her moment of grief with other survivors, Amabelle commits suicide in order to go "to the other side of water" (the expression means leaving the country or dying in Haitian creole) one last time, now to meet the ghosts who have made this kind of crossing before her already. The concept of healing represented in the narrative entails the acknowledgement of vulnerability and incompleteness, the lack of a recuperative closure or ending.

It would be challenging to apply the notion of precarity in other works of the Haitian diasporic imaginary in which linguistic hybridity of intertextual diversity has been explored already. Representations of precariousness in fragmented narration and imagery abound not only in Danticat's other texts but also in other literary representations of the Parsley massacre and diverse Haitian reimaginings of other local traumas. Also, the scope of the notion of precarity as a mode of social relatedness could be tested in the broader post-colonial context. In trauma studies, the need for the decolonization of trauma studies has been stated in the past decade. The workings of memory are vitally influenced by local cultural differences and the legacies of the colonial past as Rothberg and others have shown (Rothberg 2009 and Martinez 2015). Similarly, the theoretical question of the need to decolonize precarity may be posed. In this article, precarity certainly seemed a useful conceptual tool to think of healing as a function of social relationality and not the opposite of trauma in a post-colonial context.

WORKS CITED

- Butler, Judith. 2015. "Foreword." In Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Translated by Aileen Derieg, vii-xi. London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. 2004 (2006). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Clitandre, Nadège T. 2018. *Edwidge Danticat: The Haitian Diasporic Imaginary*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Clitandre, Nadège T. 2001. "Body and Voice as Sites of Oppression: The Psychological Condition of the Displaced Post-colonial Haitian Subject in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 2: 28-49.
- Danticat, Edwidge. 2017. *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*. Minneapolis: Graywood Press.
- Danticat, Edwidge. 2010. *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Danticat, Edwidge. 1998. *The Farming of Bones*. New York: Soho.
- Danticat, Edwidge. 1998b. "Afterword: Nature Has No Memory" In *The Farming of Bones*, 314-317. New York: Soho.
- Danticat, Edwidge. 1998c. "Interview." In *The Farming of Bones*, 318-323. New York: Soho.

- Dandridge, Rita B. 2004. *Black Women's Activism: Reading African American Women's Historical Romances*. New York: Peter Lang.
- During, Simon. 2015. "Precariousness, Literature and the Humanities Today." *Australian Humanities Review* 58: 51-6.
- Eckstein, Lars. 2006. *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic: On the Poetics and Politics of Literary Memory*. Amsterdam: Brill.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Hogg, Emily J., and Peter Simonsen. 2020. "Potential Precarity? Imagining Vulnerable Connection in Chris Dunkley's *The Precariat* and Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun*." *Criticism* 61, no. 2: 1-28.
- Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. 2021. "Body Marks of the Past in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Home*" *Metacritic* 7, no. 1: 160-176.
- Lipton, Briony. 2015. "Gender and Precarity: A Response to Simon During." *Australian Humanities Review* 58: 63-69.
- Lloyd, Moya. 2015. "The Ethics and Politics of Vulnerable Bodies." In *Butler and Ethics*, edited by Moya Lloyd, 167-192. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Lorey, Isabell. 2015. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Trans by Aileen Derieg. Foreword by Judith Butler. London: Verso.
- Martinez-Falquina, Silvia. 2015. "Postcolonial Trauma Theory in the Contact Zone: The Strategic Representation of Grief in Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of Sea Light*." *Humanities* 4: 834-860.
- Morrison, Jago. 2013. "The Turn to Precarity in Twenty-First Century Fiction." *American, British and Canadian Studies Journal* 21, no.1: 10-29.
- Morrison, Toni. 1987. *Beloved*. New York: A. Knopf.
- Morrison, Toni. 1995. "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, (2nd ed.) edited by William Zinsser, 83-102. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Munro, Martin. 2006. "Writing Disaster: Trauma, Memory, and History in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*." *Ethnologies* 28, no.1: 81-98. <https://doi.org/10.7202/014149ar>
- Newman, Janet. 2013. "Spaces of Power: Feminism, Neoliberalism and Gendered Labor." *Social Politics* 20, no. 2: 200-221.
- Ngumbi, Junush Castoy. 2019. "Precarity and Affiliate Relationships in Elieshi Lama's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*." *English in Africa* 46, no. 3: 55-73.
- Nunes, Ana. 2011. *African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction*. New York: Palgrave.
- Rody, Caroline. 2001. *The Daughter's Return: African American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rohrleitner, Marion Christina. 2011. "Breaking the Silence: Testimonio, Revisionary Historiography, and Survivor's Guilt in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker*." *Intersections: Interdisciplinary Humanities* 28, no. 1: 73-85.

- Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. 1999. *Neo-slave narratives: Studies in the social logic of a literary form*. New York: Oxford.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. 1992. "Daughters, Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *American Literature* 64, no. 3: 567-597.
- Rushing, Sara. 2015. "Butler's Ethical Appeal: Being, Feeling and Acting Responsible." In *Butler and Ethics*, edited by Moya Lloyd, 65-90. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.