

Dreams, Doors, and Death: Exploring Liminal Space and Mortality in *Exit West* and *The Farming of Bones*

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Oftentimes, the most complicated narratives challenge the permanence of death by emphasizing the impermanence of the human experience. This is frequently accomplished through the creation of liminal spaces in text, which become almost purgatorial in their function. Here, characters choose to confront and embrace the inevitability of death or to reemerge into life. In Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, the linear historical narrative her main character Amabelle creates is interspersed with bolded sequences that draw from both her memories and her dreams. In order to come to terms with the trauma of the Haitian Massacre, these chapters communicate Amabelle's physical and psychological turmoil. Similarly, Moshin Hamid's *Exit West* centers on refugees Nadia and Saeed's multiple

passages through doors blackened by the sudden, spontaneous creation of international portals. As the couple moves through several doors and across several borders, their relationship to each other and themselves constantly evolves. Amabelle's dreams are manifestations of her acceptance of death and embrace of her mortality, while the portal-doors function as avenues for rebirth. Thus, Hamid and Danticat explore the complicated relationship human beings have with death and mortality in the wake of trauma through their rich descriptions of liminal space.

The idea of death, often either personified as a skeletal, scythe-wielding figure cloaked in black or deconstructed into a vast, foreboding void, has long enticed creators because of its ambiguity, its inherent and abstract unknowability. In order to fully complete an exploration

of mortality without engaging with the permanence of sacrificing a key character to the so-called “other side,” many writers often choose to create an environment that exists between life and death, a liminal space that becomes almost purgatorial in its function and construction. Both Edwidge Danticat and Mohsin Hamid are two such novelists. Both choose to use liminal space as the primary environment for their characters to confront their mortality head-on. In Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*, the linear historical narrative her main character Amabelle creates is interspersed with ephemeral, bolded sequences that draw from both her memories and her dreams. In order to come to terms with the trauma of her parents’ deaths and reconcile the life she lived with both Dominican and Haitian loved ones in 1937, Amabelle uses these chapters to communicate her emotional, physical, and psychological turmoil. Similarly, Hamid’s *Exit West* centers on refugees Nadia and Saeed’s multiple passages through doors blackened by the sudden, spontaneous creation of international portals. As the couple moves through several doors and across several international borders, their relationship to each other and themselves evolves to each new environment. When analyzing these two texts in conjunction, the border between life and death becomes increasingly hazy. There is pain on either side, and there is growth on either side. Hamid and Danticat explore the complicated relationship human beings have with death and mortality in the wake of trauma through their rich descriptions of liminal space.

To clarify, the aim of this argument is not to equate the experiences of the characters within these two texts, nor is it meant to erase the key differences in each novel’s unique historical context. *The Farming of Bones* is a realist text set in 1937, before, during, and after the Parsley Massacre. *Exit West* is a magical realist novel set in the modern day, aiming to complicate and criticize the contemporary world’s treatment of Middle-Eastern migrants. Rather, the synthesis of these two texts is designed to analyze how these two authors reconcile trauma (especially that which results from state-sponsored violence) with the inevitability of death and reflections on corporality. Both choose to develop a sort of liminal space to explore the complexities of mortality, but their characters approach their survival in diverse ways. Similarly, both operate under a sort of shared sense of cultural liminality, one that closely identifies with that outlined by critical cultural theorist Homi Bhabha.

Culture, to Bhabha, inherently exists in what he calls the “realm of the beyond” (Bhabha 1). Essentially, he describes a sort of cultural liminal space tied to the development of personal and communal development. Bhabha claims that this tension between the weight of the past and the pull of the present, this “process of displacement and disjunction” is representative of adaptation, of cultural and personal growth (Bhabha 8). Through this discomfort and acknowledgement of the complexities of history, characters like Amabelle, Saeed, and Nadia have the opportunity to reconcile their past trauma with

their current lived experience. By using Bhabha's conceptions of liminal culture as the common thread that connects these two descriptions of the "in-between" spaces that "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" and redefine personal identity, the linkage between Hamid and Danticat's liminal spaces becomes self-evident (Bhabha 2). Amabelle, Saeed, and Nadia all reemerge from liminality radically different from when they first entered that middling space.

The liminal spaces employed by Danticat are inherently a part of Amabelle herself. The space is created by her independent desire to reflect on her internal, rich bank of memories and her experience of vivid, moralistic dreams. As a child, Amabelle experienced dreams that made her feel caught between the realm of humanity and the supernatural spiritual world. She insists that playing "with [her] shadow made [her] feel less alone," and that even the real people (including Sebastien Onius, the who Amabelle loves above all else) around her occasionally felt like they were "one of them" (Danticat 4). In her memories, the borderland between life and death is blurred as ghosts meld with people, as dreams bleed into reality. Similarly, when Amabelle nearly dies from a severe fever as a child, her dreams remind her that her life, while impermanent, is not quite over; Danticat personifies death in the creation of Amabelle's animated voodoo doll. The doll assures Amabelle that she "will be well again," and that she will live to be "a hundred years old, having come so close to death while young" (Danticat 56). These initial experiences, though loosely tied to the trauma of adolescence and illness, familiarize a young Amabelle with the death that she will eventually confront. Danticat uses the liminal space of Amabelle's childhood dreams as an introduction to the harsh realities she will soon face. This liminality reminds her of life's volatility, yet shields her from the brutal experience of living as a Haitian in the Dominican Republic that will later characterize her adulthood.

Though Amabelle is conscious of human mortality from both the beginning of the narrative and her life as a whole, the liminal space created by her memories makes death far more tangible to her, far more traumatic. In the same bolded passages that detail Amabelle's dreams, Danticat interweaves memory with Amabelle's linear lived experience. This is yet another instance of a blurred border complicating Amabelle's relationship to her interior self. The first traumatic memory with which Amabelle and the audience are confronted occurs when she details her recollection of the day her parents died. While Amabelle describes how she watched her parents drown in the raging Dajabón River, she recalls how she screamed so intensely that she could "taste blood in [her] throat," lending an aspect of physical and emotional trauma to the scene (Danticat 50). Though she attempts to swim after her parents, to join them in their fight for survival, she is pulled back to life by two boys who remind her that "unless [she] wants to die...[she] will never see those people again."

(Danticat 50). As Amabelle continues to survive, to outlive both her parents, she slowly begins to process her trauma internally, choosing silent and dreamlike reflection as a method of reconciliation with her past. According to Megan Feifer, Danticat draws attention to both Amabelle's emotional turmoil and her personal growth by creating a transition of "grief from that of posttraumatic shock to a longing to narrate" her lived experiences (Feifer 45). Feifer notes that Amabelle's recovery fluctuates, that the transition may be linear but is not necessarily direct. She moves through her trauma in waves, grieving at the same time she heals through expression. In this liminal space, Amabelle is directly confronted not only with mortality and the border between life and death, but with survivor's guilt. In order to process this internal conflict and to avoid transgressing this border, she turns inward. She leans back into her dreams and her memories to rediscover her parents and reconnect with her emotions.

In Hamid's *Exit West*, the liminal space detailed in text takes on a far more physical element. It is represented by a sort of supernatural, border-challenging door that opens to another part of the world. Identified only by their internal blackness, these doors allow free passage into a random, alternative spot across the seven continents; obviously, for those who seek refuge from their native homeland, these doors offer them a chance at a sort of "new life." Nadia and Saeed, who live in a unspecified, war-torn country located somewhere in the Middle East, travel through these doors in order to both save their lives and salvage their burgeoning romantic relationship. Almost immediately after they travel through their first door, Hamid employs his first description of liminal space using the terminology associated with death and rebirth. Nadia, the character who is arguably the more emotionally aware partner in her relationship with Saeed, remembers that passage through the doors was known to feel "both like dying and being born" (Hamid 104). Upon embracing the darkness and emerging on the other side, Nadia notes that she felt "a kind of extinguishing" in her mind and body (Hamid 104). Both like a dying elder and a newborn baby, Nadia cannot stand and fights for breath after emerging through the portal-door. For Nadia and Saeed, there is a definitive "before" space and a definitive "after" space as they exchange one location for another, their native culture for a foreign one. They make a deliberate choice to walk through the door, and their bodies pay a physical price for supernaturally moving across time, space, and land. They are transformed, entirely different from the two people who first embraced the darkness of the door.

Similarly, the diction that Hamid uses to describe Nadia and Saeed's life both before and after their transition through time is riddled with reminders of mortality. Saeed moves out of his homeland with Nadia, a decision that means isolating his widowed father who wanted to stay close to Saeed's mother's grave. Hamid makes it known to his audience

that, much like death, the passage through the portal-doors is a permanent decision, one that radically alters both an individual's life and the lives of the people around them. Saeed recognizes that when a person makes the decision to migrate, they "murder from [their] lives those [they] leave behind" (Hamid 98). In using such extreme comparisons, Hamid raises the stakes of migration of this kind; Saeed and Nadia have to initially choose their lives together over the lives they had independently curated at home. The "death" of their past lives forces both characters to come to terms with the precariousness of their travels, of their lives. In order to move forward, to make progress, Nadia and Saeed have to recognize that their movement requires sacrifice. Both the companionship and the culture they were used to is radically and permanently altered.

In both cases, the liminal space created by the authors creates an avenue for self-reflection and personal growth. Amabelle matures rapidly because of her past traumatic experiences, but as a consequence she becomes an increasingly internal, isolated person, while Nadia and Saeed in contrast must cling to the familiar, to each other, in order to navigate their new world post-portal. Both authors explore mortality and impermanence, but their creation of liminal space ensures that both characters process their struggles in ways that are culturally and personally affirming. This choice once again reflects Homi Bhabha's definition of liminality, especially when he asserts that liminality is the "connective tissue" of identity (Bhabha 5). Without this in-between space, human beings would struggle to understand themselves and their position in their communities. In this sense, Danticat and Hamid are essentially exploring different reactions to change, loss, and grief in the context of an "interstitial passage," especially one that "entertains difference" in interpretation and narrative result while still acknowledging the impermanence of the human experience and the unknowability of one's own fate (Bhabha 5). Their liminal spaces in text provide the "room" for each character to grow into a new, fuller version of themselves because of the flexibility these spaces offer.

However, given that Amabelle's space is entirely confined to the inside her own mind while Nadia and Saeed's space is externally represented by the portal doors, it is important to make the distinction between their experiences with liminality. Since Amabelle reflects exclusively on the internal level, she cannot share her trauma in the same way that Saeed and Nadia can. Through a shared bodily experience, a passage through a physical door, Nadia and Saeed can empathize with each other's feelings on a more intimate level. Conversely, Amabelle's experience is deeply personal to her. While her dreams and memories give her the necessary space for recovery, she has trouble commiserating with fellow orphans and fellow refugees because they cannot know exactly how she carries her trauma. According to scholar Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, Nadia and Saeed's passage through the doors instantaneously allows

their “bodies to move as fast as [their] minds,” lending their experience the proper physical vocabulary to communicate their trauma to both one another and their fellow refugees (Gheorghiu 88). Amabelle has no such language, choosing instead to communicate to the audience alone through the dialogue of her dreams. Though the function of both spaces is essentially identical, the recognition of the key difference in physicality reveals the different strategies for healing. Amabelle’s is fueled by pensiveness, reflection, and an embrace of the past, while Nadia and Saeed’s is fueled by commiseration, communication, and an embrace of the present moment. For Nadia and Saeed, the doors are a physical escape; for Amabelle, her dreams and her memories are an emotional safe haven.

The bolded sequences in Danticat’s work quickly grow from the simple narration of dreams and memories into a space for Amabelle to actively process her trauma. However, her growing preference towards her internal experience rather than the establishment of supportive networks outside her own mind ultimately prevents her from being able to embrace her new experience, her life after the massacre. As critic Eliana de Souza Ávila remarks, Amabelle initially experiences a sort of “numbness” after the massacre, an innate “disidentification from the surreal horror” that the death of her friends and even the loss of Sebastien thrusts upon her already grief-stricken body (de Souza Ávila 27). Though she finds safety and refuge across the Haitian border with Yves, Sebastien’s friend (and, momentarily, her lover), Amabelle cannot fully release herself from her past, attempting simultaneously to nurse her new traumas while preventing old ones from tearing open once again. She does so by turning inwards, crossing into her own liminal space. In a dream, Amabelle conjures a dust storm where people who she cannot identify walk before her. Embodied as her childhood self, she clings to her father and mother’s hands. However, when the storm subsides and the dust settles, Amabelle is left alone, with her “hands raised up, in motionless prayer,” as if abandoned by every person meant to guide her (Danticat 137). This dream, intentionally crafted by Danticat, is to encourage the reader to recognize Amabelle’s isolation and the inherent impermanence of her situation, of her life. Almost every person she has loved has slipped through her fingers like sand, crossed over the border of death and left her feeling entirely alone. She is precariously caught between life and death, and transgressing this border means embracing her family but sacrificing her new relationships, her new experience. In visualizing the chaos as a dust storm, Amabelle is able to grapple with her isolation, to give herself tangible meaning to her grief and loneliness.

Amabelle further confronts and soothes her mounting grief by recognizing the healing power of her dreams after first speaking with other survivors. They attempt to provide her with support but can offer no salve as potent for Amabelle as her own inner sanctuary. She speaks with Yves, with his mother, Man Rapadou, and Sebastien’s mother,

Man Denise, all in hopes of finding closure; while she emerges from each conversation with more strength, she is also reminded of her grief, of the things she had lost. After all these conversations, Danticat includes one of the longest bolded passages yet, allowing Amabelle the space to arrange her complicated feelings and understand that her old life has disappeared, has died with many of her loved ones. In her dream, she claims that the “dead season is, for [her], one never ending night,” and that the only way to ease her pain is to cross into “heaven,” or the “veil of water that stands between [her] parents and [her]” (Danticat 262). The fact that she frequently emerges from her liminal space, from her dreams, from her heaven, is the only thing that “makes [her] alive” (Danticat 263). Literary critic Jennifer Harford Vargas asserts that, “in her interior life,” Amabelle becomes the most cognizant of her suffering and comes to terms with it by meditating “on her own shadows and hauntings by fusing them with collective losses and disappearances” (1166). By giving her loved ones new life in her mind, Amabelle transcends the previously solid border between life and death. However, she cannot exist in this liminal space permanently despite the relief it gives her from her “internal struggles” and “the pain of her losses” (Vargas 1166). She compares her dreams to an “amulet” that protects her “from evil spells,” from experiencing further suffering (Danticat 264). She is slowly discovering that, in order to truly heal from her trauma, she must embrace the hurt, her grief, and her life’s transience by leaning into her past.

Nadia and Saeed, however, come to terms with their losses together. Since they do not carry their liminal space with them, since their memories do not feel tangible like Amabelle’s, they can grieve as a pair and, eventually, as a collective. According to scholar Michael Perfect, Hamid extends the liminal space of his portal-doors to the descriptions of refugees across the world, stating that migrants are “between roads and next to boundaries, and they sleep in the margins of streets” (191). Upon trying to navigate their new environment and their evolving relationship, Nadia and Saeed become increasingly aware of their surroundings. They initially cling to one another for support. They pitch their tents together, sleep in the same bed, share the same food, and make joint decisions on when and where they want to go next. They shield one another from extra pain by providing each other with reminders of home. They notice that their own migration, their own difficulty, is similar to every other person who passed through that marginal, liminal space between the portals. According to scholars Knudsen and Rahbek, the fluid migration and the suffering that often accompanies it in *Exit West* is “intrinsic to human nature,” and the experiences of Nadia and Saeed are recognized as almost universal (445). They recognize that loss is a part of movement, that “this loss unites humanity” and their ability to understand the “temporary nature of our being-ness” allows them to find support and comfort (Hamid 203). Even when cognizant

of the inevitability of dying, “in the face of death,” both Nadia and Saeed are aware that a better world for themselves, for their families, and for their peers is possible (Hamid 203). They find solace in community, in collectivity; they see impermanence represented in themselves and in their fellow portal migrants.

However, the strain of migration and the constant pressure of becoming houseless, starved, or marginalized like the people they see around them strains their relationship. As they grow into two separate people, their idea of what their lives should be changes. Nadia is socially active and areligious, while Saeed is internal and deeply spiritual. They simultaneously feel “friction,” “resentment,” “love,” and “loyalty” towards one another, but their tension, proximity, and shared trauma prevents them from attaining comfort and happiness in their new existence (Hamid 203). Their connection makes them feel caught, pulled between their lives before the portals and their lives after. They make the decision to separate as they have made every other: together. Hamid calls attention to the end of their relationship by framing it as a sort of passing on. He notes that the end of a couple is a “small death” in and of itself (Hamid 205). The “notion of death, of temporariness” is highlighted through Nadia and Saeed’s breakup, through their mutual decision to cut ties, but so too is the “value of things,” especially their lives (Hamid 205). At the end of the novel, Nadia and Saeed are completely at peace, but they are completely separated. Nadia has found companionship with a cook, Saeed with a pastor’s daughter. Love still exists between them, but it is not romantic; the consequence of their continuing lives is their relationship. In order to live on, to escape the constant middle-existence the portal passages and border-crossings presented to them, their partnership must come to an end.

The final scene of *The Farming of Bones*, in contrast, is one of reunion in death. After weeks of existing between her dreams and her new reality, Amabelle makes the decision to travel once more over the border to make a final visit to her old home in the Dominican Republic and the Massacre River. As she stands before the place her parents died, the place where hundreds of Haitians were murdered, and the symbolic resting place of Sebastien, Amabelle makes one final reference to the salvation of her dreams. She claims that she looked to them “for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed” (Danticat 308). She sees the river as “Sebastien’s cave, [her] father’s laughter, [her] mother’s eternity,” and so as she floats atop its waters “like a newborn in a washbasin” (Danticat 308). She surrenders her life over to her dreams, over to her past. She embraces life’s impermanence by launching herself into her dreams, living amongst her family rather than her painful new memories. She heals her trauma by leaning into her own mortality, by accepting it with the sense of peace that was not afforded to her parents, to her beloved. Her trauma is healed through dreaming, through reunification.

The climaxes of *The Farming of Bones* and *Exit West* explore both the acknowledgement of death and of life, but the decision to accept life's impermanence is carried out by Nadia, Saeed, and Amabelle to differing degrees. The choice to embrace death or rebel against it reveals the long-term effects of emotional pain and the volatility of life; both sets of characters have to survive in tumultuous, unfamiliar settings, yet both react differently. In both these instances, Amabelle, Nadia, and Saeed develop new "strategies of selfhood" as a result of their passages through liminal as described by Bhabha (Bhabha 2). While Nadia and Saeed's senses of identity have been strengthened by their communities, Amabelle's is uniquely "singular" because of her choice to embrace her own dreams, her own memories of the past (Bhabha 2). Though Amabelle's ultimate fate is intentionally left ambiguous, she acknowledges her mind and her dreams as her safe haven. She decides in her final moments to side with her memories and her lost loved ones, to cease her internal liminality by excluding herself from her post-massacre life. Amabelle reconciles with her trauma by exploring and embracing death, choosing to "reunite" with the figures she lost in both her dreams and at the conclusion of the novel. Conversely, Saeed and Nadia choose to embrace their new lives after traveling westward, choosing to appreciate their lived experience for what it is, while they have it. After confronting liminality and emerging from the other side, Nadia and Saeed are reborn. However, the end of their relationship still reflects the impermanence of the human experience. While Amabelle's journey concludes, Nadia and Saeed's just begins. After the doors, Nadia and Saeed are bright, alive, and separated; after her dreams, Amabelle is tranquil, at peace, and reunited.

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