

Trauma and Recovery: The Dynamics of Hurt and Healing in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* and Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

Nairobi Walker

Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York

Abstract

In *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Farming of Bones*, Ngugi and Danticat represent history creatively via individual and collective memory. The flashbacks in *A Grain of Wheat*, which consist of the major characters' responses to colonialism and Kenyan nationalism and independence, produce a multilayered psychological narrative that can be fruitfully interpreted not only through postcolonial theory but also through trauma and recovery theories. As Valerie Kaussen, Francophone Caribbean literary scholar, notes, trauma is a popular, contemporary framework for analysis. Cultural critics have used trauma theory to talk about twentieth-century history and "especially the history of the Western world in the post-World War II era" (Kaussen 191). Trauma in relation to recovery is also a growing field for analysis. Literary critics and scholars in other disciplines have applied insights from Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* to their current projects. In addition, "trauma theory . . . bears striking resemblances to postcolonial critical theory," writes Kaussen (191). One important similarity between the two theories is their emphasis on "memory and the Individual experience over 'official' histories that efface the complex effects of history on the subject" (Kaussen 191). Both *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Farming of Bones* privilege subjective, individual and collective histories over objective, standard histories. They also place considerable emphasis not only on the physical violence of trauma but also on the psychosocial healing process from atrocities. Amabelle's double layered narrative in *The Farming of Bones*, for instance, reads like a survivor memoir. Her text juxtaposes a linear account of the 1937 massacre of Haitians with "bold print," "fragmentary" sections that allude to the trauma of surviving the massacre, of witnessing her parents' deaths and losing her lover. This novel, like *A Grain of Wheat*, conveys the struggle for survivors to live a meaningful life. Both texts reveal what it is for traumatic memories to resurface at any time and why, to use Herman's words, "Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried" (1). Together, these novels explore the dynamics of hurt and healing in ways that comment on and challenge twentieth-century trauma and recovery theories.