

**THE LANGUAGE OF WOUNDS AND SCARS IN EDWIDGE
DANTICAT'S *THE DEW BREAKER*, A CASE STUDY IN
TRAUMA SYMPTOMS AND THE RECOVERY PROCESS**

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the representation of a violent and traumatizing past in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004), a collection of short stories that depicts the effects of a torturer's atrocious crimes on the lives of his victims and their descendants. The contribution argues that this work of fiction by the Haitian-American writer is structured upon the principle that traumatic experiences can only become intelligible – and, therefore, “representable” – by considering the severe psychological wounds and scars they leave on the victims. These scars habitually take the form of paranoia, nightmares, ghostly presences, schizophrenia, and “dead spots” that have a very difficult time finding their place in the protagonists' consciousness and language. In spite of the fragmented and discontinuous character of these representations, the writer manages to unveil the kind of psychological and social dysfunctions that often surface when people have not fully accepted or assimilated aspects of the past that keep itching in their unconscious. However, despite the prevailing bleak tone of the stories, Danticat still leaves some room for hope and recovery, as many of the victims find ways to come to terms with and overcome those individual and collective dysfunctions.*

Keywords: Haitian history, Edwidge Danticat, violence, memory, trauma theory, recovery strategies.

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**EL IDIOMA DE LAS HERIDAS Y LAS CICATRICES
EN *THE DEW BREAKER* DE EDWIDGE DANTICAT,
UN ANÁLISIS DE LOS SÍNTOMAS DEL TRAUMA Y
DEL PROCESO DE RECUPERACIÓN**

RESUMEN. *Este artículo estudia la representación de un pasado violento y traumático en The Dew Breaker (2004), una colección de relatos que muestra las consecuencias que los atroces crímenes de un torturador tienen en las vidas de sus víctimas y de los descendientes de éstas. El trabajo mantiene que esta obra de la escritora haitiana está estructurada de acuerdo al principio de que las experiencias traumáticas sólo se hacen inteligibles – y, por lo tanto, “representables” – cuando se tienen en cuenta las profundas heridas y cicatrices que dejan en las víctimas inocentes. Estas cicatrices tienden a aparecer representadas en forma de paranoias, pesadillas, presencias fantasmagóricas, esquizofrenias, y “zonas muertas” que sólo consiguen abrirse paso con dificultad en la conciencia y el discurso de los protagonistas. A pesar de lo discontinuas y fragmentadas que resultan estas representaciones, la escritora logra hacer evidentes la clase de disfunciones psicológicas y sociales que con frecuencia surgen cuando la gente no ha aceptado o asimilado del todo aspectos de un pasado todavía latentes en su subconsciente. Sin embargo, a pesar del tono trágico de los relatos, Danticat descubre ciertos espacios para la esperanza y la recuperación, ya que muchas de las víctimas encuentran la manera de aceptar y superar esas disfunciones individuales y colectivas.*

Palabras clave: historia de Haití, Edwidge Danticat, violencia, memoria, teoría del trauma, estrategias de recuperación.

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The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner that undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as verbal narrative but as a symptom.

Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

In the dark, listening to her aunt conduct entire conversations in her sleep, he realized that aside from blood, she and he shared nocturnal habits. They were both palannits, night talkers, people who wet their beds not with urine but with words. He too spoke his dreams aloud in the night, to the point of sometimes jolting himself awake with the sound of his own voice. Usually he could remember only the very last words he spoke, but remained with a lingering sensation that he had been talking, laughing, and at times crying all night long.

Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*

1. INTRODUCTION: HAITI HISTORY REVISITED

One could argue that revisiting Haiti's agonizing and violence-ridden history only a few weeks after a 7.0-strength earthquake hit the island on January 12, 2010, may seem like a sadistic exercise all too prone to fall into deterministic interpretations that leave little space for the analysis of the impact of human agency on the predicament of a country. And yet, it is usually at these peak moments of material devastation and destitution that the First-World nations turn their eyes – if not for too long – towards areas of the globe that, otherwise, remain utterly forgotten or only sporadically heard about. Of course, a death toll that may soon rise above the 200,000 mark could hardly have gone unnoticed in a world that, at least regarding communication technologies, is growing increasingly interconnected. Which is good, for medical teams and equipment, and relief supplies, would never have reached the island with the required urgency if news reports had not made apparent the magnitude of the catastrophe. But beyond this, and more importantly perhaps, images of the unprecedented destruction have also served the purpose of raising the viewers' awareness of the real conditions in the country *before* the natural disaster took place. As a report in *Times Magazine* pointed out:

[...] Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, can't and shouldn't simply be restored to what it was before the quake. The catastrophic death toll was a result not so much of the earthquake's strength but of Haiti's history of corruption, its shoddy buildings and ultimately its poverty. As we have seen in the aftermath of previous disasters, rebuilding takes time, commitment and sustained funding – and in Haiti's case, they're especially important. What's at stake goes beyond that nation's shores. (Walsh *et al.* 2010: 24)

While few people would disagree with this last statement, what history shows is that this is, by no means, the first time in which the future of the country has depended on somebody else's willingness to help. Unfortunately, as Flood rightly notes, Haiti's recurrent calls for attention and assistance from the rest of the world have usually been “rewarded with centuries of invasion, blackmail, the robbery of Haiti's natural resources and the impoverishment of its people” (2010: 1).

According to Edouard Glissant, one of the foremost specialists in Caribbean identities and cultural expressions, when talking about the modern history of Haiti, it is more accurate to speak of a “non-history” (1997: 62), since, from the very moment in which Europeans reached the island of Hispaniola in December 1492, the place has been plagued by crimes and brutal exploitation that have made it quite impossible for its people to build a collective memory to give shape and sense to the events taking place on the island. Any quick survey of the recorded history of the territory is likely to leave one shocked by the fast succession of emperors, kings, revolutionaries, dictators, and for-life presidents who have misruled the land for over five hundred years. Farmer, among others, has shown that in most cases the blatant thefts and corruption that have historically governed Haitian politics find their origin in foreign interventions and the kind of popular uprisings that usually responded to them (2003). The first instance of such insurrections took place, in fact, only one year after Columbus reached the shores of the Caribbean isle, when the Taíno natives destroyed the fort of La Natividad, which the Spaniards had built to conduct their feudal-colonial form of government. As Columbus wrote in his log, when he returned the following year, he found the fort reduced to ashes and his men’s corpses scattered on the beach (Cohen 1969: 127 & ff.). The Spanish explorer learnt later on that the natives had risen up against his men due to their cruel mistreatment of the Taíno workers and the kidnapping of their women.

Of course, the tensions in Spanish-Indian relations did not finish with this incident. The Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas chronicled in his well-know *Very Brief Relation* the hair-raising atrocities that the Taínos suffered under the rule of the Spanish conquistadors who, apart from implanting the vicious plantation system of *encomiendas y repartimientos*, frequently punished the natives by cutting their limbs off, bleeding them to death or burning them alive. Several Taíno chiefs led uprisings and revolts in the mountainous regions of the island but most of them, weakened by disease and starvation, ended up in brutal human massacres. It is little wonder that by the early 1520s – only 30 years after Europeans had reached the New World – over 85 percent of the Taíno population had died as a result of either the infamous labor system or the highly infectious illnesses that the newcomers brought from the Old World.

With the near-extinction of the native inhabitants of the island, African slaves were brought over to the sugar plantations by the Spaniards, as an ever-growing number of hands was needed to make their business profitable. Césaire and Glissant speak of the slave trade in these colonial contexts as a case of “traumatic dislocation”, (1981; 1997) since it entailed not only the forced transportation of black disposable bodies across the Atlantic but, to be usable in the plantation system, they also needed to be fully deprived of consciousness of who they were

and where they came from. In order to consummate this complete erasure of their shared memories, black slaves were subjected to all kinds of physical and psychological tortures that inevitably generated absences, silences, and negations as the essential ingredients of their traumatic past. As Gilroy has maintained, “plantation slavery was more than just a system of labour and a distinct mode of racial domination. [...] it provided the foundations for a distinctive network of economic, social, and political relations” (1993: 55). One would have to be really naïve not to see the elongated shadow of this distinctive network of relations working its way through the history of a country that has been mostly characterized by coups and disruptions, not to mention the interferences from outside. It is no coincidence that by the 1530s plantation owners had already begun to refer to the natives, blacks, and maroons who offered some resistance to their dehumanizing rule as *cimarrones* or “wild animals”. The tendency among Euro-Americans to describe the inhabitants of this half of the island in animalistic terms has remained a constant throughout their history and has contributed to the perpetuation of the image of Haitian people as ungovernable.

When the Spanish settlers became aware that the chances of finding gold and silver were much greater in the American mainland – Mexico and South America – some insular colonies went into decline. As a result of the increasing poverty in the second half of the 16th century, the social boundaries among the different ethnic groups started to break down and a good deal of the population came to be of mixed Taíno, Spanish, and African descent. Puri and others have argued that racial and cultural hybridity have been one of the most outstanding characteristics of Antillean societies from those early days (2004: 2). This does not mean, however, that social stratification did not occur along racial lines; in fact, the plantation system continued to be an effective way of preventing most coloured people from gaining access to the resources and social power structures in the land. By the early 17th century, the Spanish settlers were afraid of slave revolts and pirate attacks in the outer settlements and, as a result, most of the population was obliged to move closer to Santo Domingo. The effects of this forced migration, known now as the *devastaciones* (devastations), could not have been more disastrous: on the one hand, half the people died of starvation and epidemic diseases and, on the other, the settlements abandoned on the northern and western coasts of the island were captured by French, British, and Dutch buccaneers.

Haggerty has documented the first French settlements on the island of Tortuga, off the northern coast of today's Haiti (1989). In the first half of the 17th century, most of these adventurers were outlaws who managed to survive by assaulting Spanish ships and hunting wild animals. Finally, King Louis XIV established the first official colony on Tortuga in 1659 and, soon after, the new French West India

Company took control over this territory and also claimed the western part of the island of Hispaniola, which was named Saint-Domingue. The imperialist conflict over this part of the island came to an end in 1697 with the Treaty of Ryswick, which gave to France one third of the total surface of the isle. Soon the fertile lands around the main northern port of Cap-François attracted numerous French planters who, with the support of the King, made huge fortunes from the intensive crops of sugar, tobacco, coffee, cotton, and indigo. But the rapid expansion of the economy in the colony in the first half of the 18th century also meant an intensification of the slave trade, since it is estimated that one third of the Africans died within the first two years after their arrival and half of them did not last longer than five years on the plantations. The *Code Noir* imposed by Louis XIV, which was originally intended to grant some basic human rights to the slaves, also approved brutal corporal punishments if they did not show due respect and submission to the master. James states that although an average of 25,000 slaves were brought to the island each year during the second half of the 18th century, the black population hardly ever surpassed 500,000 and was in constant need of being replenished by new slaves stolen from the western coast of Africa (1963: 55). Although there were not many survivors of this vicious system of exploitation, it may be worthwhile retrieving the voice of one of the few, Henri Christophe's personal secretary, who reported the obnoxious abuses:

Have they not hung up men with heads downward, drowned them in sacks, crucified them on planks, buried them alive, crushed them in mortars? Have they not forced them to eat excrement? And, having flayed them with the lash, have they not cast them alive to be devoured by worms, or onto anthills, or lashed them to stakes in the swamps to be devoured by the mosquitoes? Have they not thrown them into boiling cauldrons of cane syrup? (Qted. in Farmer 2003: 64)

Two significant consequences originated from the continuous mistreatment and annihilation that Africans suffered in the Caribbean colonies. To start with, the fact that the cruel plantation system never allowed a natural increase of their population meant that it could never adapt and be integrated in the receiving societies. Many specialists have referred to the strong influence of some aspects of Western African cultures in countries such as Haiti. One example often given to illustrate this continuing influence is the folk religion called *voudou*, which combines elements of traditional ancestor worship among many African tribes with other elements borrowed from the Catholic liturgy. As will be seen below, voodoo has been used and misused by revolutionary and political black leaders throughout Haitian history to provide a kind of socio-cultural "glue" that would bring their people together whenever they felt that exogenous forces could threaten their own traditions and way of life. The second consequence of the plantation economy is,

in fact, related to these early versions of cultural nationalism, since many of the revolts in the second half of the 18th century were organized by escaped slaves who preached the destruction of the plantation system and the expulsion of the white colonists. These uprisings were led by rebels such as François Mackandal and Vincent Ogé, who took some of the abandoned plantations and claimed new rights for the maroon and black population. Both of them suffered, however, very cruel public executions and, despite the differences in number (in 1790 there were about 40,000 white settlers and over half a million enslaved Africans), racial discrimination remained a common practice. It is true, though, that the growing number of mulattoes on the island (about 25,000) were born free and some came to own extensive plots of land – almost one third of the plantation property –, becoming quite wealthy by the time of the French Revolution.

When the white colonists realized that these *gens de couleur* were gathering too much power and beginning to gain a status similar to their own – for the Revolutionary government in France had granted them full citizenship –, they began to enact a number of statutes that banned them from certain occupations, forbade them to marry white women or excluded them from a number of social activities. Because the republic was at war with Britain and Spain in the early 1790s, though, they were forced to make concessions to the black republicans dominating the northern part of the island, and many slaves were freed by their colored landowners. It was in late August 1791 that the Haitian Revolution proper began, led in the Cap-Français area by a Houngan (voodoo) priest named Dutty Boukman, who burnt down many of the plantations of the region. Although he was captured and summarily executed, the revolt spread very quickly to other parts of the colony. France then sent the commander Léger-Félicité Sonthonax to try to stabilize the situation by proclaiming the freedom of slaves – which was already a *de facto* reality –, although with some limits, of course. With the assistance of British settlers, many white planters resisted the application of the new policy, and it was only in February 1794, when the French National Assembly ratified the abolition of slavery in all their colonies, that Toussaint L'Ouverture and his well-disciplined army of former slaves started to play a key role in the colonial conflict. After defeating and driving back the British in 1797, L'Ouverture – with Jean-Jaques Dessalines and Henry Christophe – became the real ruler of the colony. Four years on, L'Ouverture was already in control of the whole island, after taking the eastern part of the territory from the Spaniards, and immediately abolishing slavery. However, Napoleon sent a huge army to re-conquer the colony and re-establish the plantation system under his brother-in-law Charles Leclerc. The armed conflict that ensued was among the bloodiest ever to have been fought in the Caribbean with over 40,000 casualties on each side, many of them caused by the yellow fever and malaria that appeared with the rainy season in 1802 (Cf. James 1963: 355).

Toussaint L'Ouverture never saw the end of the conflict and the declaration of independence of his country, as he was captured and deported to France, where he died in prison. Generals Dessalines and François Capois led the revolutionary army which, outraged by the brutality of the French – they hanged, burned alive, drowned, and tortured their prisoners – paid their enemies back the same way. Napoleon finally had to abandon his idea of restoring France's New World empire, as Dessalines and his troops defeated the French army at the Battle of Vertières in November 1803. Two months later, on the first day of 1804, the General declared the independence of the country and renamed it, using the indigenous term "Haiti". But, unlike L'Ouverture, Dessalines showed absolutely no mercy with the French troops and civilians that were left behind and, according to Heiln he slaughtered over 3,000 whites in the days following the Declaration of Independence (1996: 122-25). This bloodbath had very harmful effects on the image of the new nation abroad, and most European powers refused to recognize its sovereignty. As James (1963: 390) observes, despite the significance of the hemispheric event, which set hundreds of thousands of enslaved individuals free and later helped decisively in the abolition of slavery elsewhere, the episode has been underrepresented in most world histories and was even unknown to outstanding political analysts of the day. But as if this almost complete lack of recognition by foreign powers were not enough, the aftermath of the revolution made it clear that, ironically, Haiti's future was not going to be any brighter than before.

When France finally recognized the independence of the county in 1825, it was at a price of 150 million gold francs as compensation for "lost property" (land, slaves, machinery, etc.). In order to force Haiti to pay this debt, France, Britain, and the U.S. imposed a very rigid embargo which, basically, excluded the country from all the important world markets. From the beginning, the government was forced to ask for high-interest loans, which have constantly crippled their economy. Moreover, as is the case in many Third-World nations, the revolution was almost immediately followed by a coup d'état and a civil war – between Christophe and Pétion – that did nothing but to throw the country back into its earlier state of chaos. It is true that Haiti helped Simon Bolívar with his liberation of South American territories from Spanish rule, but this was at a cost of being almost perpetually in a state of bankruptcy. Although the above-mentioned debt to France was reduced to 90 million francs, still the country was not able to pay it until 1947. Pétion's successor, Jean-Pierre Boyer, came to power soon after Christophe committed suicide in 1820, and for a period of over twenty years he achieved the unity of the island. This came to an end in 1844, when a nationalist group called "La Trinidad" led a revolt in the eastern part of the island and the Dominican Republic was born as a result. What followed during the second half of the 19th century was a long period of political instability caused by the conflicts between the dominant classes and different

foreign business corporations. Leaders all-too-fond of calling themselves emperors, kings, or generals came to power to last rarely more than three or four years. There were periods – such as the 1870s and 1880s, under Domingue and Salomon – of peace and respite, when the Haitian economy and cultural life seemed at last to flourish. However, recovering from the shocks of over thirty coups in less than a century was not an easy task, and it became impossible when foreign nations began to intervene in Haitian politics in the last decade of the 19th century.

In Chapter 8 of his book *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, Chomsky explains that from 1888 on the US Marines made their presence felt in Haitian waters, and in 1914 they invaded the island in response to a peasant insurrection which broke out as a result of the despotism of the last five presidents, who were either killed or escaped into exile between 1911 and 1915 (1993: 197 & ff.). Although the political situation in the country had become quite unsustainable, it was also evident that Americans had grown apprehensive of the role that a few hundred Germans were beginning to play in the economy of the nation. The German community, mostly composed of traders and entrepreneurs, had integrated very successfully in the local, land-owning aristocracy and were already financing some of the new industries and the commerce on the island. The U.S. saw this fact as a serious threat to their own interests and the State Department supported a consortium of investors that were to take control of the National Bank of Haiti and the government Treasury. The occupation of the island by U.S. troops lasted twenty years and, in fact, it meant a throwback to the plantation economy, as laws were passed to force peasant freeholders to work as unpaid hands building roads and other infrastructures to make the businesses of American companies profitable. Although the military forces were withdrawn in 1934, the U.S. remained in control of the country's economy and finances until the end of the following decade. And this brings us to the period about that we hear about, if mostly only obliquely, in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004): the corrupt and bloodthirsty Duvalier dictatorship which lasted almost three decades, from 1957 to 1986.

Although, as several reviewers have remarked, specific references to the brutal regime are few, by the end of the collection of short stories we come to understand that every character has been touched by the disruption and violence that underlie Haiti's history (Charles 2004; Marshall 2004). The Duvalier era (which comprises the dictatorships of François “*Papa Doc*” Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude “*Baby Doc*”) was characterized by replicating in a more intense manner the corruption and repression that had governed the politics of the country in earlier periods. As becomes evident in the stories “*Monkey Tails*” and “*The Dew Breaker*”, both regimes managed to instil terror by combining the exploitation of voodoo and black magic rituals with the extreme violence against political opponents practiced

by a paramilitary police – popularly known as the *tonton macoutes* – which Duvalier father created soon after his accession to power. In fact, the so-called “Volunteers for National Security” were nothing but death squads made up of poor and uneducated men who were kept loyal by being given land confiscated from other peasants. It is estimated that well over 30,000 Haitians were murdered during the Duvalier era by methods of torture not easily conceived by even the most sadistic minds. About the title character in Danticat’s book we read that

[t]he way he acted at the inquisitions in his own private cell at Casernes eventually earned him a lofty reputation among his peers. He was the one who came up with the most physically and psychologically taxing trials for the prisoners in his block. He was suffering, he knew it now from what one of his most famous victims, the novelist Jacques Alexis, had written was the greatest hazard of the job. Tu deviens un véritable gendarme, un bourreau. It was becoming like any other job. He liked questioning the prisoners, teaching them to play *zo* and *bezik*, stapling clothespins to their ears as they lost and removing them as he let them win, convincing them that their false victories would save their lives. He liked to paddle them with braided cowhide, stand on their cracking backs and jump up and down like a drunk on a trampoline, pound a rock on the protruding bone behind their earlobes until they couldn’t hear the orders he was shouting at them, tie blocks of concrete to the end of sisal ropes and balance them off their testicles if they were men or their breasts if they were women.

When one of the women who had been his prisoner at Casernes was interviewed three decades later for a documentary film in her tiny restaurant in Miami’s Little Haiti neighborhood, the gaunt, stoop-shouldered octogenarian, it was said, would stammer for an hour before finally managing to speak, pausing for a breath between each word. She couldn’t remember his name, nor could she even imagine what he might look like these days, yet she swore she could never get him out of her head. (Danticat 2005: 197-198)

According to Herman and Scarry, this endless fluctuation between forgetting and recalling those awful memories is typical in trauma victims who find it difficult to articulate the horrors that have left them maimed for life (1992; 1985). *The Dew Breaker*, as Dorsía Smith explains, “reconstructs the Macoutes’ violent reign by collecting the memories of those Haitians who suffered under their vindictive rule” (2007: 133). The book is especially successful in representing the effects – nightmares, ghostly figures, paranoid conduct, etc. – of the terrible violence described above on the victims and their continuing influence on the turmoil, economic decline, and political volatility of the country. Predictably, poverty and lack of education soared during this period, and thousands of Haitians decided to flee the country. Thomson has recently argued that this period has contributed decisively to the myth of Haiti as “a pariah, excluded from the family of nations and trapped in a time warp where there was little room for progress” (2010).

Without ever pontificating, Danticat's collection offers a redemptive picture of the reasons that make it so complicated for people who have lived for so long in a historical spiral of repression and violence to recover from their psychologically and physically crippled condition.

2. A TYPOLOGY OF TRAUMATIC *SEQUELAE* IN DANTICAT'S *THE DEW BREAKER*

In her collection of essays *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth remarks that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent and original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (1996: 4). Indeed, the brutality of the original event often assails the victims with such abruptness that their minds are unable to fully recognize the damage that is being inflicted upon them. Furthermore, when the violence is so generalized and has become so unremitting as has been the case in some Latin American and Caribbean countries during the 20th century, victims are likely to repress their experiences in their unconscious to the extent that, eventually, they may not be readily available in their memory. In an attempt to explain these bouts of amnesia, Hayden White observes that "the notion of the historical event has undergone radical transformation as a result of the occurrence in our century of events of a scope, scale, and depth unimaginable by earlier historians and the dismantling of the concept of the event as an object of a specifically scientific kind of knowledge" (1999: 72). Although White refers particularly to the Holocaust of the European Jews during the Second World War, the same point could be made in relation to the Duvaliers' regime in Haiti, which also proved extremely successful in deferring the trauma that derived from the cruelties that the people had experienced. In fact, it could be argued that "the truth and the real" no longer lay primarily in the crimes perpetrated against the mostly innocent victims but, rather, in the *sequelae* left on their personal and collective psyches by events that have remained unintelligible and unassimilated. Douglass and Vogler remark that "the traumatic event bears a striking similarity to the always absent signified or referent of the poststructuralist discourse, an object that can by definition only be constructed retroactively, never observed directly" (2003: 5).

Despite the conspicuous difficulties in unravelling and constructing a collective past from the shards of a vase that has been repeatedly shattered into a thousand pieces, this is precisely the task that Danticat takes upon herself with an emotional involvement which, some would say, verges on the pathological. It is interesting to note that some of the stories in *The Dew Breaker* oddly resemble the testimonies that are beginning to be reported by earthquake survivors. Massimo wrote in a

review of Danticat's book that it offers "a compelling portrait of individuals united against their will, even without their knowledge, by pain, trauma, and loss. A collection of perspectives that, together, give a snapshot of a community struggling to get out from under the tragedy" (2004). Of course, the tragedy in this case does not involve pulling dead relatives out of the rubble or carrying their corpses to mass graves without any ceremony, but the effects seem to be very much the same, or even worse, since the trauma and loss are more deeply-felt and unfathomable when the wounds have been human-inflicted. As critics have observed, what characterizes Danticat's collection most distinctly is the sense of disjunction and fragmentation that the stories present, compelling the reader to delve more deeply into the dilemmas faced by the victims. Eder says about the book that "there are horrors so heavy that they seem untellable. To bear to tell them so that we can bear to read them, a writer must find somewhere outside – peaceful, unmarked – to project them from" (2004). It seems that Danticat has found in a community of her compatriots living in a Brooklyn neighborhood that "site of memory" (see Nora 1989) from which she can start what Jeffrey Alexander calls the "trauma process", which begins with a realization that there is a fundamental "gap between event and representation" (2004: 11).

The Dew Breaker opens precisely at just such a moment. The first chapter of the collection, "The Book of the Dead", presents us with a road story seen through the eyes of "Ka" Bienaimé, a second-generation Haitian-American sculptor who is travelling with her father from New York to Miami to deliver a sculpture of the latter to a TV-series star, a Haitian herself. Father and daughter have already reached Florida when the story begins but, somehow mysteriously, the old man vanishes – with the artwork – the night before they have to make their delivery to the actress, and after a number of hours, the narrator feels urged to call the local police. Ka and her mother, who has stayed back in Brooklyn, grow increasingly anxious until, late in the evening, the father "appears in the hotel room doorway. He looks like a much younger man and appears calm and rested, as if bronzed after a long day at the beach" (13). When the old man is questioned and reprimanded by his daughter for his unexpected disappearance, his reluctant explanations bring us slowly closer to the climax of the story. He drives Ka to the shore of a man-made lake where he tells her that he has thrown into the water the beautiful mahogany carving of himself "naked, kneeling on a half-foot-square base, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands" (6). By turns, the daughter thinks of him and his behavior as either stupid, insane or the outrageous result of a fatal illness that he has not yet confessed even to his closest kin. But then, the critical revelation comes: "Ka, I don't deserve a statue, [...] not a whole one, at least. You see, Ka, your father was

the hunter, he was not the prey" (20). This sudden removal of his long-standing mask as a prisoner – instead of the torturer he was – not only shocks his daughter nearly out of her wits but also raises all kinds of questions in her mind: Is this why her parents have never had close friends in New York and Haiti? Is this why they rarely speak of their country of origin? Has her mother been a secret sharer of this unspeakable truth all these years? Although the former “dew breaker” (another name for the *tonton macoutes*, François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s murderous police) tries to buffer the impact of the revelation by confiding to her how dramatically he had changed after they came to the U.S., Ka feels troubled during the rest of the journey by the need to recompose an image of her parents that would be more “truthful” to their real history and motivations. The task of telling Gabrielle Fonteneau – the TV celebrity – about the loss of her much-wished sculpture seems easy in comparison with the immense efforts she must make to interpret every word, act, and gesture in the light of her new knowledge:

[...] my father, if anyone could, must have already understood that confessions do not lighten living hearts.

I had always thought that my father's only ordeal was that he'd left his country and moved to a place where everything from the climate to the language was so unlike his own, a place where he never quite seemed to fit in, never appeared to belong. The only thing I can grasp now, as I drive way beyond the speed limit down yet another highway, is why the unfamiliar might have been so comforting, rather than distressing, to my father. And why he has never wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in anyway. (33-34)

For a more conventional writer and one less familiarized with the workings of trauma, the natural way to proceed would have been to throw us back thirty years plus in this man’s life to witness what he had done in the old country that would explain his way of life, fears, and behavior in the Brooklyn neighborhood in which he lives now. Nevertheless, Danticat seems perfectly aware that, as Caruth contends, the reactions to the traumatic events are not to be found in the immediate aftermath of the atrocious experiences but, rather, “occur in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996: 11). The fact that in the next seven stories we hardly get to see the title character face to face, and that the stories are mostly centered on the lives of a younger generation who have decided to carve their future in a country different from their parents’, shows that the author finds it more appropriate and illuminating to explore the later life of the torturer’s victims than to simply present this man’s brutal violations. Of course, this does not mean that the objective crimes that caused the original disruption and brought radical changes to the lives of the afflicted are irrelevant; but rather, as Neal explains, they are the ones that

“command the attention of all major subgroups of the population” and of outside observers who will also be moved to react (1998: 9-10). Nevertheless, the true impact of the trauma becomes fully apparent only when we see it emerge in the form of psychotic symptoms affecting a group of people whose individual and collective identity has been deeply disarranged. In regard to the main characters in these stories, Kakutani observes that “they all find themselves haunted by the long events that left them with chastised bodies, fractured families or smashed hopes. For these characters the dead are not merely ghosts; they are palpable, intimately felt presences in their lives” (2006). As will be seen below, it is in the representation of those “palpable presences” – or absences, I would say – that Danticat seems to take particular interest, since they prove especially revealing about the kind of wounds and scars her characters reveal.

This is definitely the case of Dany Dorméus in the story “Night Talkers”, who is impelled to return to visit his elderly aunt Estina in Haiti when he thinks he has found in New York City the man who had killed his parents thirty-five years ago. His aunt, who raised him, although she had been deprived of her sight the same night that his parents were murdered, is absolutely delighted to learn that her beloved nephew has come back after ten years: “You have made your old aunt a young woman again” (95). She wants to know the reason why Dany has decided to come to visit her all of a sudden, without even informing her of his intention: Has he been expelled from the U.S.? Is there any problem with his health? Why did he not send word that he was coming?

“You’re right,” he said. “I didn’t just drop out of the sky. I came because I want to tell you something.”

“What is it, Da?” she asked, weaving and unweaving her fingers. “Are you finally getting married?”

“No,” he said. “That’s not it. I found him. I found him in New York, the man who killed Papa and Manman and took your sight.” (97)

Just as he makes this important revelation, they are interrupted by the old man who had earlier brought him to his aunt, and other villagers who present them with a selection of local specialties. After sampling all the dishes, Dany is quite surprised that his aunt does not show any interest in hearing more about the story he has come to tell her and, instead, goes to sleep to have her dreams spoken aloud during the night, like him. As Herman and others have argued, these troubling nightmares are a clear sign of the victims’ difficulties forming and sustaining a self in the wake of the existential crisis that trauma invariably produces (1992: 51). Curiously, the next day aunt Estina still seems intent on not letting her nephew complete his story; she invites a young man, Claude, who has been sent back from abroad for committing a crime, to have a long interview with Dany, who of course

fails to see at first the sense of this new relationship that appears to have nothing to do with the original object of his journey.

In fact, Dany is eventually compelled to rehearse in a dream the conversation he so much wants to maintain with his aunt: "They were sitting on the step where he and Claude had spoken. He began the conversation by recalling with his aunt the day his parents died" (104). The exchange the protagonist has with his aunt follows very much the lines that he had expected it to take in reality, with the elderly woman asking about the details he had gathered about the murderer. Near the end of the exchange, though, Dany is forced to admit that when he finally found a chance to take revenge on the monster who had murdered both his parents, he lost the nerve to do it:

Looking down at the barber's face, which had shrunk so much over the years, he lost the desire to kill. It wasn't that he was afraid, for he was momentarily feeling bold, fearless. It wasn't pity, either. He was too angry to feel pity. It was something else, something less measurable. It was the dread of being wrong, of harming the wrong man, of making the wrong woman a widow and the wrong child an orphan. It was the realization that he would never know why – why one single person had been given the power to destroy his entire life. (107)

The next morning, his aunt wakes him up and tells him that he has been calling his parents in his sleep. She allows him, then, to complete his narration and to ask the inevitable questions about the reason for his progenitors' murder. When he inquires whether they were in politics or were mistaken for some other activists, his aunt replies: "M pa konnen, [...] I don't know, Da. Maybe they were mistaken for all of us. There's a belief that if you kill people, you can take their knowledge, become everything they were. Maybe they wanted to take all that knowledge for themselves. I don't know, Da" (109). And with these few sentences which, instead of casting light on the matter, only increase the darkness in which Dany has lived all these years, Estina goes to sleep never to wake up again. Dany Dorméus is certainly a good representative of most of the key characters in the collection who, like him, "are caught in silences while their minds labor through impossible demands" (Charles 2004). In Dany's case, those "demands" are mostly articulated in his night talks which, in Herman's view, imply "the repetitive reliving of the traumatic experience [and] represent a spontaneous, unsuccessful attempt at healing" (1992: 44).

"The Funeral Singer" is another story that "uses its characters' experiences as a prism to examine Haiti's own difficulties in breaking free from a centuries-old cycle of violence and vengeance that continues through today, [...]" (Kakutani 2004). Here, the main characters are three young women living in New York as members of the Haitian diaspora, who are taking basic-ed lessons and trying hard to learn to

live with the grave traumas that their experiences in the old country left in them. One night, after one of their classes, they cook a dinner together and sit down to confide to each other what it was that brought them there. Mariselle's husband had been an artist who, unfortunately, painted an unflattering portrait of the president [Duvalier]. He was shot soon after, as he was leaving the gallery show where the portrait was displayed. Freda, the narrator of the story, had to leave the country when she declined to sing at the national palace after her father, a fisherman, was robbed of his business and brutally tortured by a *macoute*. "The next night he took his boat out to sea and, with a mouth full of blood, vanished forever" (172). The past of the third member of this female trio, Rézia, is by no means any more pleasant, as she was raped in her childhood by another paramilitary man:

This is Rézia's story: When she was a girl, her parents couldn't afford to keep her, so they sent her to live with an aunt who ran a brothel. They lived in three rooms behind the brothel and that's where Rézia spent most of her time. One night when she was sleeping, a uniformed man walked in. She dug herself into the bed, but it did no good, so she passed out. (173)

Needless to say, a very significant part of this story of unutterable grief and repressed memories concentrates on the tactics each of the three women develop to cope with a past that keeps haunting them. As Suk demonstrates in her discussion of postcolonial paradoxes, although those harmful original events appear inaccessible to those who suffered them, yet they are "too available in nightmare, hallucination, and unwanted repetition. [...] The event evades direct reference and knowledge, and yet provides constant torment" (2001: 75). The reader finds a clear instance of this fact when their language teacher shows them a painting full of sunflowers and tells them there are no dead spots in it. Yet the three Haitian women can only respond that "life is full of dead spots" (169), so colorless and senseless has their existence become. Freda, the funeral singer, also recalls that as a child she used to sketch figures in her notebook that "were drawn so close together that they looked like they were fighting one another". Her mother made a rag doll for her to try to relieve the pain of seeing all those frightening "phantoms" at night but, "[...] after my father was gone, I twisted the doll's neck night after night. During the day, I crowded the pages in my notebook with more tiny faces, to keep me company in case my mother also disappeared" (178).

Anybody familiar with the symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) would recognize more than enough manifestations of the condition in the behavior and comments of the three main characters in "The Funeral Singer". Having been the passive recipients of the traumatic events when they were still very young, the three of them have serious problems in trying to render their lives wholesome, even in exile. In Eder's opinion, "these characters are like swimmers pulled from

the depths. Nitrogen bubbles course agonizingly in their bloodstream, memory racks them" (2004). The most recent research in trauma theory has found, on the other hand, that apart from the traditional categories of victim and survivor, there may be others such as those of onlookers and secondary witnesses, which may also be useful in the study of traumatic phenomena in certain communities. The story entitled "The Bridal Seamstress" offers very interesting material in this direction, since it recounts the experience of a journalist, who has never been to Haiti herself, but who is brought into fairly close contact with a survivor of the Duvalier regime. Aline Cajuste, an intern at the *Haitian American Weekly*, is sent by her superior to interview Beatrice Saint Fort, a lady who has spent her life making wedding dresses and is now giving up the trade. During the first part of their conversation, it becomes clear that a remarkable cultural distance separates the two women, who often get impatient with each other because they repeatedly ask the wrong questions and reveal only general information. Aline feels at several points that, as her editor in chief had warned her, she is losing control of the interview, for it is the elderly woman that seems to hold the reins of the conversation. The interview gains in interest, though, when, while strolling around Beatrice's neighborhood, she anxiously declares that one of the houses down the street is owned by a Haitian prison guard:

"We called them choukèt lawoze," Beatrice said, the couch's plastic cover squeaking beneath her. "They'd break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they'd come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away. He was one of them, the guard." (131)

Later on, the old lady shows Aline the soles of her feet, where the stigmas left by the whipping she received in prison just because she had refused to dance with the *macoute* are still perfectly visible. Although the journalism intern is at first reluctant to ask the inevitable question because she knows Beatrice will feel insulted, she eventually inquires how she can be so sure that it is the same person after so many years: "No one will ever have that much of your attention. No matter how much he'd changed, I would know him anywhere" (132). When Aline calls her editor to inform her about the results of the interview, she explains that the old seamstress is "a bit nutty" and that maybe her report is not worthwhile. Her boss is not too sympathetic, though: "[...] I didn't send you there to judge her state of mind. Come back and write what I sent you to write: Bridal Seamstress Retires. Simple" (133). Aline goes to her car thinking of heading back immediately to the office to type up the story, but she notices the prison guard's house and begins to wonder whether there might not be a bigger story there, one that would earn her boss's respect. So she decides to have a look around the place and to find out if the old lady's fears were in fact justified. After

she has inspected the house, which is apparently empty, the next-door neighbor tells her that nobody has been living there for some time, and that the owner, a Colombian woman, is ineffectively trying to sell it from Bogotá. The intern returns to Beatrice's house to tell her the real facts, but the old seamstress insists that the guard uses the empty premises as a hideout to keep an eye on her. It also becomes evident that the real motivation behind Beatrice's retirement is that she thinks she can be more easily tracked down while in business. By the end of the story, Aline seems to be convinced that the former seamstress is a paranoid who never managed to fully recover from the psychic wounds she received in her youth. Nevertheless, she develops an unexpected empathy with her interviewee, which could easily be described as a "secondary form of PTSD":

Growing up poor but sheltered in Somerville, Massachusetts, Aline had never imagined that people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives. Maybe there were hundreds, even thousands, of people like this, men and women chasing fragments of themselves long lost to others. Maybe Aline herself was one of them. (137-138)

Writing about an earlier novel by Danticat, Martin Munro cogently explains that "trauma creates a kind of restlessness, an anxiety about stopping for even an instant, and they both work constantly to escape the 'phantoms'..." (2006: 88). Beatrice, Freda, and Dany are clear examples of people running away from ghosts that their Haitian past has deeply branded on their psyches. All of them carry the indelible image of the cruel *macoute* who truncated their lives by killing their parents, and then threatened them to continue the slaughter if they revealed the truth. It is no wonder that, as Herman points out in one of the epigraphs to this article, these characters should be endlessly caught in the dilemma of denying the events that hurt them so much and proclaiming them aloud to obtain some justice and recognition for the innocent victims (1992: 1). *The Dew Breaker* is particularly successful in representing the wounds and scars of those Haitians who suffered under the Duvalier regime and the "reign" of their unscrupulous torturers because we are allowed to see the terrible economic, political, and social ramifications that this oppressive system – like slavery – brought to the lives of the whole population. Not even those who have abandoned the country or were only tangentially touched by the torturers' cruelties, such as the protagonists of "Seven" or "Water Child", seem totally free from that violent legacy that impedes their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. In Charles' opinion, the sense of dislocation and disjunction that pervades the book "is thematically significant in a way that it can be in few other novels made of collected stories" (2004). This is, no doubt, because the broken "non-history" of the nation keeps endlessly returning to torment and traumatize the private existence of its citizens, even when they have

experienced it only indirectly. As will be seen below, still more intriguing is the fact that the perpetrators are by no means excluded from this collective trauma, since they are among the most deeply haunted by those phantoms and vacant spaces that they themselves contributed to conjuring up. Both the opening and the closing chapters of the collection offer much evidence suggesting that, wicked and terrifying as the title character may seem, he is as susceptible to the workings of trauma as anyone else. Marshall concludes that, by covering all those perspectives, the “novel is a serious-minded work of a mature talent, a searching examination of murderous terror and its lingering aftershocks on generations” (2004).

3. PATHS TO RECOVERY: STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH TRAUMA AND GRIEF

As should have become clear in my discussion above, “the traces of violence, rupture and dislocation continue to possess and to haunt generations of Haitians, thereby producing a present that is played out as repetition and recurrence, endlessly circling around a central lacuna of loss and dispossession” (Sweeney 2007: 54). This is true not only of the victims who suffered the violence and abuse in their own flesh, but also of those others who witnessed it only obliquely or heard about it indirectly. In fact, it could be argued that differences in class, color, education, gender or language do not seem very effective in protecting anybody from the workings of trauma. We have observed that even the everyday life of people living abroad, having enjoyed a good education, speaking a different language, and fairly disconnected from the history of their native country, may be deeply affected by the shadow of events that took place when their subjectivity had not even begun to form. In Caruth’s words,

it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place and another time. (1996: 8)

Characters such as Ka Bienaimé and Aline Cajuste have lived their entire lives in North America, and yet they are also stalked by revelations about the past that will compel them to look upon their present condition and future aspirations in a different light. It is not just that, as most of the children of exiles, they want to develop a kind of double identity and a “double consciousness” through contact with home cultures and diasporic communities; in order to gain control over their future life, they feel they must reclaim their right to know and give a new shape to a past that has been most often suppressed (Cf. Singh *et al.*, 1994: 19). This is not an easy task because, as we have seen, most of the memories haunting them

take the form of psychological shrapnel that proceeds from brutal violence and political terror. Still, most of the stories in *The Dew Breaker* seem to indicate that even those most deeply stricken by trauma and grief may manage to find those links of continuity between past and present, between reality and representation, and between who they are and who they believe themselves to be that will allow them to build a new sense of self.

Despite everything said above about the paralyzing and incapacitating powers of trauma, Lambek and Antze have argued that “remembering trauma may be personally empowering and sometimes leads to collective organizing. The inscription of trauma narratives may be a necessary, sufficient, and compelling means of establishing recognition” (1996: xxiv). This is certainly the case of the group of young women in “The Funeral Singer”, who simply by sharing their traumatic experiences during their after-class reunions come to realize that they are not the only ones having to endure such painful memories: “I thought exposing a few details of my life would inspire them to do the same and slowly we’d parcel out our sorrows, each walking out with fewer than we’d carried in” (170). Although it is obviously difficult for them to represent those sorrows in articulate ways, it soon becomes clear that having to refashion them in a more intelligible manner turns the whole exercise into a therapy that may even succeed in de-reifying the original event. Something of that sort happens to Freda, the narrator of the story, who has always associated her father’s disappearance with her public role as a funeral singer: “The first time I ever sang in public was at my father’s memorial Mass. I sang ‘Brother Timonie,’ a song whose cadence rises and falls, like the waves in the ocean” (175). After she has told her friends about the sadness she felt on that occasion, and probably encouraged by the rum they ingest during their meetings, she confesses that she is proud of the comfort she offered other families by singing at their funeral ceremonies: “[...] I was always appreciated and well-compensated” (175). In an even more cheerful vein, Mariselle relates to them the funny story of how her slaughtered husband once came to make a portrait of Jackie Kennedy at the Port-au-Prince harbor. By combining their excruciating experiences in Haiti with others more light-hearted – and even parodic – in nature, these three women manage to appease the ghosts that have been haunting them for a long time. White has discussed at some length the therapeutic potential of certain narrative modes:

Modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of defetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically and clear the way for the process of mourning which alone can relieve the burden of history and make a more if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible. (1999: 82)

The fact that “The Funeral Singer” concludes with the three friends singing together a last performance of “Brother Timonie” is a clear sign that they have completed quite successfully the first part of the trauma process: “When we’ve exhausted poor Timonie, we move onto a few more songs, happier songs. And for the rest of the night we raise our glasses, broken and unbroken alike, to the terrible days behind us and the uncertain ones ahead” (181).

Douglass and Vogler have spoken of collective trauma – such as that produced by the blood-thirsty *macoutes* – as a form of “social glue” that is likely to bring groups of people together on the basis of ethnicity, gender, race, handicap, etc. (2003: 12). This is certainly the case of Freda, Mariselle, and Rézia in “The Funeral Singer” who, by retrieving their respective memories, come to see them as part of a social narrative which makes them members of an “imagined community” whose main aim is to heal the wounds past events have produced. Most of the characters in Danticat’s collection, however, are not as lucky as these three women, since they are condemned to face their tribulations on their own. As my discussion of the consequences of traumatic events should have shown, one of the habitual effects of this type of experience is precisely to make the individual feel isolated, either as a result of shame, remorse or just anxiety. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman explains that pulling out of a traumatic condition tends to be easier when a person builds a “healing relationship” with others who have gone through similar experiences (1992: 134). Now, *The Dew Breaker* presents us with several characters who find it difficult to relate to others mainly because they carry burdens from their past that they feel they need to deal with by themselves if they ever want to recover a state of normalcy and stability. It is not a coincidence, in this sense, that one of the words appearing recurrently in reviews of the book is “redemption” for, paradoxically enough, many of the victims seem also to be in need of paying a price for their long fear of and secrecy about those ghosts. Curiously, the trauma process in these cases is only triggered off when they come into contact with others who have been more deeply hurt or damaged by different catastrophes.

Nadine Osnac, the protagonist of “Water Child”, is a character who would fit quite squarely into the archetype of the dysfunctional exile who can barely cope with an existence that has left her stranded between two worlds. The symptoms of her personal and social disease are evident from the outset of the story, as she rereads her parents’ letters from home many times, trying to find “between the lines, a note of sympathy, commiseration, condolence. But it simply wasn’t there” (54). Her parents wrongly assume that because she was given the chance to escape the context of violence and poverty on the island, she will be responsible for providing materially and emotionally for those left behind. However, her life and work in a Brooklyn neighborhood turn out quite different from what she had

expected. She feels very much like her post-op patients in the hospital ward where she works as a nurse who, after waking up from the anesthetic, are “bewildered to discover that their total laryngectomies meant they would no longer be able to talk. No matter how the doctors, nurses, and counsellors prepared them, it was still a shock” (55). Like them, Nadine finds it impossible to communicate naturally with her colleagues at work, her parents, and even her boyfriend – all of them connected to her homeland – who fail to see the pressures she is living under. Talking to them “always made her wish to be the one guarded, rather than the guardian, to be reassured now and then that some wounds could be healed, that some decisions would not haunt her forever” (63). It is no wonder that at the end of the story, when she sees her own distorted reflection on the shiny metal doors of an elevator at the hospital, she should find that woman, who needs to protect so many others, “unrecognizable”. As Scarry has observed, it is fairly common for trauma victims to undergo this type of schizophrenic “split” when they try to pull out of their painful condition (1985: 48).

Nevertheless, what captures this writer’s – and the readers’ – attention in this and other chapters of the book is the highly personal tactics that the shell-shocked characters develop to fill in the immense lacunae that they find in their lives. Nadine is partly able to overcome the pain of having to look after her parents and being asked by her lover to miscarry her baby by trying to give consolation to her voiceless patients in the hospital and building an altar for the unborn child at home: “She had once read about a shrine to unborn children in Japan, where water was poured over altars of stone to honor them, so she had filled her favorite drinking glass with water and a pebble and had added that to her own shrine,…” (57). Like Dany in “Night Talkers”, Nadine seems to see her trauma in more relative terms when she compares her situation to that of other people who have their lives (and deaths) indelibly marked by some unexpected twists of fortune. This is what Dany Dorméus also comes to realize during the long wake for his aunt, when the mourners tell him stories of the immense support that she had given to everyone in the village. Only then does he become aware of the important mission the old lady had left for him, which involves helping somebody – whom he despises because of his crimes – to come out of the type of darkness and despair that he himself has experienced. His exchanges with Claude, the young criminal, make him look at the reasons for returning to his village in a conspicuously different light: “Perhaps she had summoned him here so he could at last witness a peaceful death and see how it was meant to be mourned. Perhaps the barber was not his parents’ murderer after all, but just a phantom who’d shown up to escort him back here” (116). In a way, this conversion of the torturer into a “friendly phantom”, encouraging him to come back to his native land in time to see his aunt die in peace – and also to

provide assistance to somebody not less cruel than the dew breaker – is a sign that Dany is finally coming to terms with his past. He is still a night talker at the end of the story, but he has at least taught someone as badly-hurt as himself to relieve his guilt by undergoing a similar catharsis:

[...] The only thing Dany could think to do for his aunt now was to keep Claude speaking, which wouldn't be so hard, since Claude was already one of them, a member of their tribe. Claude was a palannit, a night talker, one of those who spoke their nightmares out loud to themselves. Except Claude was even luckier than he realized, for he was able to speak his nightmares to himself as well as to others, in the nighttime as well as in the hours past dawn, when the moon had completely vanished from the sky. (120)

Although Kakutani is right in stating that Danticat's collection is mostly about the age-old "cycle of violence and vengeance" disrupting Haiti and its population, she also adds that it "unfolds to become a philosophical meditation on the possibility of redemption and the longing of victims and victimizers alike to believe in the promise of new beginnings held forth by the American Dream" (2004). Obviously, in the cases of Dany and Nadine, the possibility of this rebirth into a new sense of identity, free of those phantoms from their past, depends on their ability to empathize with others who have faced similar trials and to find a niche for themselves in the new environment in which they live now. The same argument would also be valid for Aline Cajuste in "The Bridal Seamstress" who, after her first-hand witnessing of the effects of trauma on Beatrice, the seamstress, is transformed into a much more determined and responsible journalist. A completely new set of career aims emerge in her, instead of her earlier compliance with the dictates of her editor at the magazine: "These were the people Aline wanted to try to write about now, no matter what Marjorie Voltaire said. And if Marjorie didn't like it, then she would quit and go work somewhere else. She might even return to Somerville and, at last, let her parents learn who she was" (138). In Singh's opinion, the emergence of all these long-silenced stories that Aline now wants to report is "a means of creating community as part of the dialectic between past and present in moving toward the future. It allows for a narrative exploration of the past that rejects or circumvents positivistic assumptions about truth and history" (1994: 18).

This idea of the revisionist and regenerative power of narrative, especially in cases in which traumatic experiences are still very much present in people's minds, becomes even more evident when the subjects affected are not just the victims but also the perpetrators and their closest kin. Trauma theories have traditionally tended to draw a clear line between victims, perpetrators, and witnesses, thus conveying the idea that while the first group is in need of mourning, re-membering, reconnecting and building some sort of commonality (Herman 1992), the second

should be approached from the perspective of their accountability and responsibility for the crimes. *The Dew Breaker*, however, is as much about the possibility of recovery for those who were victimized by the extreme violence as about the possibility of repentance and regeneration for those who inflicted it on others. As the author explained in an interview with Hong soon after the publication of the novel, she was particularly interested in representing how the effects of the Duvalier dictatorship were equally observable in the victims and supporters of the regime (2004). We already observed earlier in the article how the daughter of the torturer had to reconsider her position in the community and her whole existence when she learnt about her father's unspeakable past:

Watching my father accept with a nod of thanks, I remember the chapter "Driving Back Slaughters" from *The Book of the Dead*, which my father sometimes read to me to drive away the fear of imagined monsters. It was a chapter full of terrible lines like "My mouth is the keeper of both speech and silence. I am the child who travels the roads of yesterday, the one who has been wrought from his eye." (31-32)

But if Ka Bienaimé is forced to assign a new meaning to every single move or gesture her father makes after the knowledge she has newly acquired, her mother's situation is even more unnerving because she has had to live with the burden of that knowledge for over thirty years. Although her devotion to her husband, the dew-breaker-turned-into-barber, is unquestionable, there are of course moments when her confidence and self-control are tried: "It was always like this, her life a pendulum between forgiveness and regret, but when the anger dissipated she considered it a small miracle..." (86). It is precisely this distressing oscillation and its eventual metamorphosis into a work of providence due to the incommensurable power of her will – or her faith, as she would probably prefer to put it – that we are privy to in the chapter "The Book of Miracles".

Told from the point of view of Anne, the former torturer's wife, the story tells us about the experiences of the family on a Christmas Eve when, encouraged by this pious woman, the threesome go to the midnight Mass in their neighborhood. As they drive toward the church, the mother entertains her daughter and husband by recounting the stories of different miracles that have occurred in other parts of the globe. But when they go by the cemetery, she holds her breath for a very long time, as she recalls her younger brother's disappearance under the waves in Haiti – an accident she has never told Ka about. Nevertheless, "her daughter had already concluded early in life that this, like many unexplained aspects of her parents' life, was connected to 'some event that happened in Haiti'" (72). As they drive toward the church, we become aware of how different their Christmases have been from those of other members of the community and how Anne has needed to think

of all kinds of superstitions to justify their distance and difference from the rest. Yet, she has always wondered if there was reason for all their caution: “[...] soon after her husband had opened his barbershop, he’d discovered that since he’d lost eighty pounds, changed his name, and given as his place of birth a village deep in the mountains of Léogâne, no one asked about him any more, thinking he was just a peasant who’d made good in New York” (77). The story, however, takes a new turn when, already at the service, Ka believes that she sees Emmanuel Constant in the congregation, a man who is “wanted for crimes against the Haitian people”. At first, Anne feels quite proud of her daughter’s righteous displeasure when she stares at the back of the criminal but, naturally, all kinds of questions begin to trouble her soon after:

What if it were Constant? What would she do? Would she spit in his face or embrace him, acknowledging a kinship of shame and guilt that she’d inherited by marrying her husband? How would she even know whether Constant felt any guilt or shame? What if he’d come to this Mass to flaunt his freedom? To taunt those who’d been affected by his crimes? What if he didn’t even see it that way? What if he considered himself innocent? (81)

Fortunately, in the end the man was not the criminal that Ka had assumed him to be, and this comes as a great relief to her mother. Still, those moments of tension are not enough to encourage her to reveal the truth to her daughter and she needs to resort to her usual ritual in order to stabilize her vertiginous oscillation between “forgiveness and regret”:

A long time ago, more than thirty years ago, in Haiti, your father worked in a prison, where he hurt many people. Now look at him. Look how calm he is. Look how patient he is. Look how he just drove forty miles, to your apartment in Westchester, to pick you up for Christmas Eve Mass. That was the miracle Anne wanted to share with her daughter on this Christmas Eve night, the simple miracle of her husband’s transformation, but of course she couldn’t, at least not yet, instead she told another kind of miracle. (72-73; italics in original)

“The Book of Miracles” demonstrates that the abuses and atrocities committed in the old country can be as heavy a burden and as disturbing for those who suffered or witnessed them as for those others who are related to the inflictors. The latter are also prisoners of a past that greatly conditions their daily life and creates a profound sense of restlessness and insecurity. It is not just that they frequently fear the retaliation or vengeance that their relatives may suffer from former victims but, more critically, they can never be sure whether the version they have heard of the incidents that have marked their existence is complete and accurate. Two of the stories in the collection, “Monkey Tails” and

“The Dew Breaker”, throw us back into the past by nearly twenty and forty years, respectively, to let the reader be privy at first hand to events that took place on the island and that left a lot of people maimed. The first story moves back and forth between the same date (February 7) in 1986 in Haiti, when “Baby Doc” Duvalier made his escape to France, and in Brooklyn in 2004, when one of the survivors of that chaotic day is about to be a father of his first child. The protagonist, Michel, was only twelve when the dictator decided to leave the country with his wife, and he tells us his innocent perception of the turmoil into which everything went when people thought they were finally free after thirty years of harrowing oppression. Michel was doubly traumatized on that unforgettable day in 1986 because he saw for the last time his best friend – who happened to be the son of a *tonton macoute* – and because he was informed of who his real father was – a man in his ghetto who had made it his business to exploit all his poor neighbors. As he now lies in bed with his wife in New York, he is recording on a tape all the experiences he went through on that day as a kind of therapy and as homage to his childhood friend: “As for you, my son, your myth is this: it’s now past mid-night, if you’re born today, on this, the anniversary of the day that everything changed for me, on the day that I became a man, your name will be Romain, after my first true friend” (164).

The closing chapter of the book, “The Dew Breaker”, has received much praise from critics and reviewers because it presents in all its crudity the work of the vicious torturer we have heard about in the previous stories from the perspective of his victims, his family members, his tenants, etc. In Charles’ opinion, “it’s a flawless finale that frustrates our desire to see the monster drawn to mythic proportions” (2004). While it is true that he is as cruel as ever to his last victim, a subversive preacher who had been trying to inspire his followers to rise up against the “beast” – Duvalier father – , we are also allowed to see his constant doubts and even remorse in regard to the activities he has carried out to support the regime: “He had been constantly thinking about getting out of this life, moving to Florida, or even New York, making himself part of the new Haitian communities there, to keep an eye on the movements that were fuelling the expatriate invasions at the borders” (189). While he is working on his last kill, he is troubled by thoughts of his reasons for joining the death squads, the pain he has caused to people he did not even know, the possible ways of escape using the money he has been saving up. It is in one of these moments of absent-mindedness that the preacher manages to grab the broken leg of a chair and “to slide the piece of wood down the fat man’s face, tearing the skin down to his jawline” (226). The preacher knows, of course, that by having done so he has signed his death sentence,

and yet he had not been completely defeated. The wound on the man's face wasn't what he had hoped, he hadn't blinded him or removed some of his teeth, but at least he'd left a mark on him, a brand that he would carry for the rest of his life. Every time he looked in the mirror, he would have to confront this mark and remember him. Whenever people asked what happened to his face, he would have to tell a lie, a lie that would further remind him of the truth. (227-228)

The few glimpses that we get of the title character throughout the book – except for the opening and closing chapters, in which he's of course central – clearly prove that the preacher was completely right in his assumptions about the influence of the scar on the torturer's future life. It is one of the great paradoxes in the book that it is the perpetrator of the crimes who should carry the most visible sign of his horrendous deeds in the past; but it gradually becomes very appropriate, as the reader realizes that he has also been tortured by the nightmares and silences that his victims have learnt to bear:

In the early years, there had been more silence than words between them [he and his wife, Anne, the murdered preacher's stepsister]. But when their daughter was born, they were forced to talk to and about her. And when their daughter began to talk back, it made things all that much easier. She was like an orator at a pantomime. She was their Ka, their good angel.

After her daughter was born, she and her husband would talk about her brother. But only briefly. He referring to his "last prisoner," the one that scarred his face, and she to "my stepbrother, the famous preacher," neither of them venturing beyond these coded utterances, dreading the day when someone other than themselves would more fully convene the two halves of this same person. (241)

Most trauma theorists would agree that this is a good recapitulation of what the trauma process is all about: "Forgetting here is as much an active process as remembering; both require effort and energy. Identity of any kind requires steering a course between holding on and letting go" (Lambek and Antze 1996: xxix). As happens with many of the other characters discussed here, the dew breaker can also find partial redemption and alleviation of his former psychic wounds and scars by sharing his story at least with those who need and deserve to know. Whether complete atonement and reparation is possible for somebody who had produced so much pain is unclear at the end of the book, but it is clear that he has found some strategies to relieve his burden by speaking out about some of the truths that have been torturing him for nearly forty years.

4. CLOSING REMARKS: REFRAMING TRAUMA LANDSCAPES

Fredric Jameson opens his insightful discussion of *The Political Unconscious* in narrative with a preface in which he stresses the importance of always "historicizing"

whatever the object of our analysis happens to be (1981: 9). He soon admits, however, that the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths: “the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things” (9). In most ways, my analysis of Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* has followed Jameson’s recommendation to concentrate our efforts on the dynamics of the act of interpretation because, in fact, events and texts always reach us as the “always-already-read”. As the first section of my contribution shows, this does not mean that one should completely disregard the historical antecedents of “things themselves” but, rather, that our readings of the past will gain significance only in the light of our experience of the present. Nowhere is this more evident than in any study of Haiti’s corruption-ridden and violent history, which can hardly be presented as a *continuum*, not just because of the constant lacunae and disjunctions that the very object shows, but because of the *sequelae* left on the minds of Haitians by their colonial and politically-restless past. In Munro’s words, “it almost goes without saying that trauma is an inescapable aspect of Haitian and Caribbean historical experience. The memory of slavery’s brutal uprooting and its enduring after-effects remain to be lulled, domesticated, and made sense of” (2006: 81). It could easily be argued that this is one of the main objectives of Edwidge Danticat’s fiction, which tries in various ways to make more intelligible and to pacify to the ghosts that have been haunting her compatriots for centuries now. According to Hong, “Danticat’s books are each a gift of knowledge that encourages – even seduces – readers to reach out of their comfort zone, to bear witness, and to find empathy in the experiences of others” (2004).

Although it is true that, in *The Dew Breaker*, she focuses more closely on the aftershocks of the terror and abuses of the Duvalier era, it is quite impossible not to see this period as a foreseeable culmination of the processes of foreign intervention, social deterioration, economic decline, and cultural impoverishment that had preceded it. Flood points out that

when, in 1985, the people of Haiti had risen up again against the Duvalier dictatorship, one of their first acts was to pull down the Port-au-Prince statue of Christopher Columbus and throw it into the sea, demonstrating that ordinary Haitian people understand the role foreign intervention has played in their past even if few outside do. (2010)

If anything becomes evident in my initial revision of the country’s history, it is that one cannot easily isolate particular chapters of it and study them without bearing in mind the long shadows that prior events were casting upon them. Even in the case of processes that, in principle, should be interpreted as positive turns in their historical trajectory – such as their independence from European imperial

powers or the syncretism among different cultural traditions –, it is interesting to observe that they have often been interpreted as signs of “a country that was never meant to be” (Thomson 2010) due to Haiti’s symbolic potential as anti-colonial, racially hybrid and dangerously resistant to the imposition of foreign socio-cultural models. Considering all these factors, it is not so surprising that Haiti should repeatedly be described as the “ungovernable country” or the “most inconsistent and perverted political system” in the Antilles. The influence of this collective unconscious becomes most evident in the psyches and behavior of Haitians who have happened to escape the horrors in their homeland, but are still seen to carry the burden of the language of wounds and scars that their history has taught them.

As should have become clear, Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* is a collection of short stories structured upon the principle that the significance of traumatizing events can only be partly grasped when we look into the effects that they have produced on the lives of those who, directly or indirectly, have been touched by the unutterable crimes. The author uses a community of exiled Haitians now living in Brooklyn as a human laboratory where she examines the dysfunctions that result from the long-delayed and often repressed memories of experiences that victims and their descendants suffered or witnessed in the old country. Marshall points out that “individual stories may remain sketchy, in a cinematic fashion, but Danticat demonstrates a resonant ability to create character and scene with the telling little detail of the emblematic incident” (2004). Indeed, we see only very specific dimensions of the characters as they come into contact with the dew breaker – a sort of catalyst – and are reminded of some harrowing events that marked them for life. The memories that come back to haunt them are predictably broken and discontinuous, and it is quite impossible for the reader to gain access to the original event since, as Lambek and Antze note, what we see are “screens always already impressed by the fantasies and distortions of a series of succeeding rememberings” (1996: xii). Hence, the secret preoccupations of characters such as Dany Dorméus, Nadine Osnac, and Beatrice Saint Font mostly emerge in the form of highly condensed symbols that need to be delved into and unravelled for us to figure out their meaning. These intriguing manifestations of the workings of trauma are the only signals we are given of the severe identity crisis that invades people when the chasm between their past and present, their experiences and how they are represented in their minds now become evident.

The second part of this contribution has dissected in some detail and classified the different symptoms produced by trauma in characters that suffered, either directly or as onlookers, the violence of the ruthless *tonton macoutes*. We have observed that their irrational fears recurrently revisit them in the form of nightmares or hallucinations that make them prisoners of a past that they have not fully come

to grips with. Most of them are constantly oscillating between the urge to know more and the temptation to deny that those horrific experiences happened to them. Some of them – Dany and Michel – are even given a chance to avenge earlier crimes upon the figure of the dew breaker, but characteristically they end up paralyzed either by uncertainty or by the conviction that punishment will mean little reparation. Indeed, the reader frequently discovers that the damage done is so profound that revenge will provide no satisfaction for characters like Beatrice Saint Font or Estina Estéme, who have carried the burden for too long to be relieved now of its effects on their bodies and minds. It is not surprising to discover that the incidence of mental disorders, such as paranoia or schizophrenia, are very common among the direct victims. But the most interesting finding in this section of the article is that trauma may prove incredibly contagious and assail the minds of those who were not even born when the real events took place. The cases of Ka Bienaimé and Aline Cajuste are paradigmatic in this sense, since both of them are allowed to look into the fissures in Haitian history thanks to the confidences revealed to them by some elder characters. Curiously, however, their grief and their urge to know may become as intense as it does for those who suffered the abuses in their flesh. Douglas and Vogler rightly argue that a “vicarious traumatization” often spreads over the younger generations of descendants who know only very vaguely about the originating event of their problem (2003: 10).

Sweeney affirms that although elements of resistance and solidarity reverberate in Haitian culture, “it is the repetitive non-history of its unmemorialized experience of slavery, the descent into poverty, civil unrest, and internal terror and corruption that more acutely occupies the present” (2007: 55). And we do certainly find traces of these illnesses in many of the characters that are represented in *The Dew Breaker*. Their stories are governed by an endless return to those huge disruptions in their memories that usually prevent them from turning their eyes toward the future. Yet, as has also become apparent in the last part of my discussion, the book offers a number of attempts to recount the traumatic past against the pattern of mere repetition and puts forth some strategies that may help individuals and the collectivity of Haitians to evade the vicious circle. Herman remarks that “traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (1992: 51). *The Dew Breaker* contains, of course, many characters whose process of self-formation is constantly interrupted by memories that separate the afflicted from others who have lived through similar experiences. Nevertheless, it is also true that on other occasions they may be brought together by chance – like the three young women in “The Funeral Singer” – and begin to build community by exchanging their stories. As

Alexander sees it, the successful representation of trauma depends fundamentally on the creation of a compelling framework of cultural classification within which the new stories may find their place (2004: 12-15). Apart from revealing the key aspects of the nature of the pain and of the victim, the latter should also manage to make the audience of the trauma representation feel certain empathy or, even, an identity with the victimized group. In most instances, Danticat can be seen to achieve this goal through her characters' revelation of those dark recesses of their unconscious where they have kept for a long time their painful memories. Even those who do not count on the company of compatriots who have travelled similarly tortuous roads do eventually find some rituals to pacify their pain and grief, and to start anew the trauma process that will allow them to reconstruct their identity, at least partially.

Some of the characters come to appease their ghosts from the past by being brought into contact with other individuals who have seen their lives truncated by unexpected catastrophes. Nadine and Dany, for example, undergo important changes when their own trauma is relativized by being set side by side with those of others who are experiencing tribulations at least as trying as their own. The fact that they feel compelled to assist those others through their dire straits help them to see their own problems in a new light and to realize that, traumatic as their experiences may have been, they are not alone in having to cope with the burden. Others experience similarly cathartic processes by memorializing the suffering of members of the older generation and projecting it onto their own existence. Aline and Michel decide to take important decisions about their future as a journalist and a father, respectively, in the light of what they learnt had happened in Haiti only a few decades ago. As Munro notes, Danticat's fiction not only presents the effects of trauma on the individual and the community, but she also identifies what is destroyed by trauma and indicates the new strategies and sensibilities that will help the characters to recover (2006: 83). This fact applies, of course, to both victims and onlookers of the disrupting events but, most interestingly, it is equally valid for perpetrators and their kin, who are also seen to suffer from dysfunctions not very different from those affecting the "prey".

Several reviewers underlined the fact that one of the most interesting contributions of the book was, in fact, that the boundaries between the consequences suffered by victims and perpetrators of the violence are often blurred (see Charles 2004), as all of them prove to be stigmatized by scars that make them feel embarrassed and remorseful, alternatively. The last part of the contribution has delved into the difficulties that the title character has to live with, the secret knowledge that at any moment his past may be unveiled by a member of his community or, even worse, by one of his closest kin or friends. The scar on his face is a constant reminder that, like the other characters in the collection, he has also needed to learn to live

with corrosive memories and an especially large set of ghosts that keep him in the unremitting state of anxiety typical of trauma victims. Unlike most trauma theorists, Danticat is a bit more reluctant to mark a clear division between victimizer and victimized, since all of them seem to be burdened by a history in which they have been pawns of forces they could not really control. This fact becomes particularly evident in the two chapters of the collection – “The Book of the Dead” and “The Book of Miracles” – in which we are given portrayals of the former torturer from the point of view of his daughter and his wife, both of whom feel compelled to consider their own position regarding his past:

It has always amazed me how much my mother and father echo each other, in their speech, their actions, even in their businesses. I wonder how much more alike they could possibly be. But why shouldn't they be alike? Like all parents, they were a society of two, sharing a series of private codes and associations, a past that even if I'd been born in the country of their birth, I still wouldn't have known, couldn't have known, thoroughly. I was a part of them. Some might say I belonged to them. But I wasn't them. (25)

Like most of the other characters in the book, Ka is required, after learning of her father's atrocious crimes in the past, Ka is also required to reconsider her identity, since her knowledge of the gap between who she is and who she had thought herself to be creates new demands and pressures that she had not experienced before. Probably, she will feel, like her mother, that “there is no way to escape this dread any more, this pendulum between regret and forgiveness, this fright that the most important relationships of her life were always on the verge of being severed or lost, that the people closest to her were always disappearing” (242).

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