

EXILED SUBJECTIVITIES: THE POLITICS OF FRAGMENTATION IN *THE DEW BREAKER*

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ABSTRACT

In her 2004 novel, *The Dew Breaker*, the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat employs the concept of fragmentation at both a thematic and structural levels. Around the central figure of a former “tonton macoute” during the Duvalier dictatorship, Danticat creates a world of alienation, estrangement and dislocation peopled by geographic and psychological exiles, which is very much determined by the Haitian political upheavals and oppressive regimes together with the harsh vital experience of Haitian immigrants in the United States. It is the aim of this essay to explore how such fragmentation is produced and how it affects those who experience it in the already fractured context of exile and migration from the Haitian homeland.

KEY WORDS: Haitian-American literature, Haiti, immigration, exile, Edwidge Danticat.

RESUMEN

En su novela *The Dew Breaker* (2004), la autora haitianoamericana Edwidge Danticat emplea el concepto de fragmentación tanto a nivel temático como de estructura narrativa. Alrededor de la figura central del que fuera uno de los “tonton macoutes” durante la dictadura de los Duvalier, Danticat crea un mundo de enajenación y dislocación habitado por exiliados física y psicológicamente, un mundo que viene determinado en gran medida por las convulsiones políticas y los regímenes opresores de Haití, así como por la difícil experiencia vital de los inmigrantes haitianos en Estados Unidos. El presente artículo pretende explorar cómo se produce dicha fragmentación y cómo afecta a aquellos que la experimentan dentro de un contexto, ya de por sí fragmentado, de exilio y emigración de la comunidad haitiana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura haitianoamericana, Haití, inmigración, exilio, Edwidge Danticat.

Since its inception, Edwidge Danticat's literary trajectory has been clearly marked by the fragmentation and dislocation ensued from the historical and political upheavals undergone by her country of origin, Haiti. Danticat moved to the United States at the age of twelve, after her parents had left years before under the Duvalier's dictatorial regime. Although she is now settled in the United States, she



has repeatedly acknowledged her own internal feeling of displacement and in-betweenness. Her life in the United States has turned her into “diaspora” in the eyes of Haitians, and in the United States she forms part of the Haitian community living in this country in a between-worlds space Danticat herself terms “limbo” (Farley 78). Thus, she partakes of the “dual identity” present in those “people who define themselves in terms of diaspora rather than nation” (Lehman 103). In her introduction to *The Butterfly’s Way* (2001), Danticat explores the implications of the term “diaspora” as employed to refer to the community of Haitians living in different worlds, dealing with her

own personal experiences of being called “Dyaspora” when expressing an opposing political point of view in discussions with friends and family members living in Haiti, who knew that they could easily silence me by saying, “What do you know? You’re a “Dyaspora.” (xiv)

From her diasporic location, Danticat recurrently writes about her Haitian home in an attempt to shed some light on the lives of ordinary Haitians, their personal and political circumstances, their suffering and hopes. Having undergone the experience of migration herself and the feeling of displacement that stems from it, Danticat writes about home in a process that Carol B. Davies describes as follows:

Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the rewriting of home. Homesickness or homelessness, the rejection of home or the longing for home become motivating factors in this rewriting. Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it. (113)

It is precisely within this theoretical approach to the negotiation of concepts such as home and exile that Danticat weaves her stories. For Danticat and for other Afro-Caribbean women who were separated from their homelands through emigration, exile represents “the source from which [they] find the strength to counter their multiple points of oppression and generate their own sense of self as they move homeward” (Chancy 14).

Partly drawing on her own life, Danticat wrote *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), a debut novel which depicted the vital experience of a Haitian girl between Haiti and the new US environment where her mother lived. In 1995 she published her acclaimed collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!*, where oppression and displacement are rampant and work at different levels in the Haitian community. Similarly, in her second novel, *The Farming of Bones* (1998), Danticat poignantly delves into the lives and thoughts of Haitian laborers in neighboring Dominican Republic, depicting once again the plight of displacement, oppression and the ensuing fragmentation that stems from both.¹ All in all, Danticat’s fiction rescues from the past

¹ For a critical analysis of these and other issues in *The Farming of Bones*, see Vega González.

and from a biased history hidden stories which she now re-members, re-imagines and re-writes. Most of those stories are deeply related to the politics of fragmentation in the context of the Caribbean and, in particular, of Haiti within the island of Hispaniola. This rescue of lost or forgotten (hi)stories is also connected with the postmodern effort to question the received monolithic nature of history, moving from univocality to multivocality and plurality. As Michael Dash aptly argues,

Caribbean writing exploits precisely this terrain of the unspeakable. In the radical questioning of the need to totalise, systematise and control, the Caribbean writer is a natural deconstructionist who praises latency, formlessness and plurality. In order to survive, the Caribbean sensibility must spontaneously decipher and interpret the sign systems of those who wish to dominate and control. (335)

In this postmodern context, Danticat's fiction is closely related to the theoretical fragmentation implied in the deconstruction of a totalizing, exclusive historiographic discourse which gives way to a plurality of voices and perspectives. Thus, the fragmented reality of the Haitian community in its own country and in the diaspora is presented by Danticat in a similarly fragmented form. Memories of the past appear intertwined with present experiences and the constant pendulum-like movement between different time lines and voices renders the idea of fragmentation, an effective literary device conducive to the "questioning of the need to totalize, systematise and control" Dash refers to (335). Furthermore, the migratory movement of diaspora writers like Danticat entails the breaking of a number of barriers, be it geographic, social, linguistic or economic, which directly point to the very idea of fragmentation. As Carole B. Davies puts it, when dealing with Afro-Caribbean women writers in the United States,

Migration and the fluidity of movement which it suggests or the displacement and uprootedness which is often its result, is intrinsic to New World experience, fundamental to the meaning of the (African) diaspora. Rigid compartmentalizations based on geography and national identity, convenient for some critics and politicians, are rendered meaningless when confronted by many of these writers. (128)

In her latest work, *The Dew Breaker* (2004), the characters appear immersed in a fractured existence which, in some cases, is related to the experience of exile and migration to the United States. After writing about the atrocities of the Duvalier's and Trujillo's dictatorships in her previous work, from the point of view of their first-hand victims, now Danticat focuses on the personal experience of those who lived those harsh years from the other side, from the side of those who have the capacity to exert their political power on others, from the side of the infamous "tonton macoutes." These were the military police created by François "Papa Doc" Duvalier to help enforce his authority on Haitians, "[e]mploying indiscriminate violence against all opposition, whether real, potential or imagined" (Arthur 23). One of those "macoutes," the Dew Breaker, is the central figure in this new work which, in its very form clearly represents the implied idea of fragmentation. *The Dew Breaker* is composed in the manner of a short story collection, with a set of



independent, yet interconnected stories, which revolve around the central character of the nameless Dew Breaker.

The concepts of place and displacement open Danticat's work with the question posed to the Dew Breaker's daughter: "Where are you and your daddy from, Ms. Bienaimé?" (3). Although they live in New York and happen to be in Lakeland, Florida, on their way to Tampa to deliver a sculpture, and despite the fact that she had been born in Brooklyn, the Dew Breaker's daughter replies that Haiti is her home, "because it is one more thing I've always longed to have in common with my parents" (3-4). Haiti, then, turns here into an imagined home, perhaps an idealized one, like the image she has of her victimized father who, she has been told, suffered unjust imprisonment back in Haiti. On the other hand, there is the "experienced" Haiti of her father as the land of no return. After doing his last job as a macoute, he decides to migrate to the U.S. in a desperate attempt to escape the unbearable burden his job represents. He leaves his country both psychologically and physically marked, since his last victim scars his face before dying. He ends up marrying the preacher's sister and setting up a barbershop in New York. His alienation prevents him from openly talking about his life back in Haiti and he constantly lies about it, as his daughter observes: "Mr. Fontaneau asks my father where he is from in Haiti, and my father lies... to reduce the possibility of anyone identifying him" (28).

The Dew Breaker's alienation and internal fragmentation operates not only at a geographic level, triggered by his own displacement, but it is also portrayed through his own body, whose most prominent sign is the facial scar which he continuously tries to hide and which stands as a metaphor for his internal split. Such split is even transferred onto the sculpture his artist daughter makes of him, the natural cracks in the flawed mahogany piece further signifying the idea of fragmentation: "I'd thought these cracks beautiful and had made no effort to sand or polish them away, as they seemed like the wood's own scars, like the one my father had on his face" (7). The Dew Breaker's sculpture represents the suffering of a prisoner, the way he is imagined by his daughter. However, the statue turns for him into the patent reminder of his real past, one his daughter had not had access to, and which keeps haunting him. This is why he eventually throws it into the water and admits to his daughter, "When I first saw your statue, I wanted to be buried with it... I don't deserve a statue" (17, 19). The Dew Breaker's dealings with the death of others takes a heavy toll on him and his feeling of remorse and search for redemption makes him take a special interest in the Ancient Egyptian philosophy concerning death and death rituals —hence his obsession with the Ancient Egyptian statues at the Brooklyn Museum. To such extent does he feel internally fragmented that he identifies with those statues who lacked some bodily parts: "There were pieces missing from them, eyes, noses, legs, sometimes even heads... I am like one of those statues" (19). This identification represents the ultimate recognition of a dismembered fragmented self which once again harks back to past events. Despite his infliction of suffering and death on others, the Dew Breaker's occupation as a macoute has rendered him in need of human dignity and forgiveness. His persistent confession that he was not the prey but the hunter reveals a great feeling of guilt and a tremendous need for his daughter's understanding.





Once she knows about the true situation of her father in the Haitian prison, Ka, the daughter, opts for a dialectic position, as if applying the Marasa principle of doubleness from voodoo lore,² seeing her father as both victim and victimizer: “It was my first inkling that maybe my father was wrong in his own representation of his former life, that maybe his past offered more choices than being either hunter or prey” (24). As a matter of fact, the Dew Breaker embodies the idea of “doubling” in his ability to display two different sides or selves of the same person. As Danticat explains in one of her interviews, “doubling” can be used as “an explanation for cruelty. How could these people who have wives and children they play with murder people? But with doubling they could have these two selves: the kind-hearted person and the evil side” (Shea 385). Far from justifying her father’s violent actions, Ka sees him as one more victim of a dictatorship which engendered violence, persecution and oppression but also a great deal of fear on the part of those who had to follow orders to kill and torture. There is no justification, the daughter knows, but maybe there is a door open to redemption.

The Dew Breaker’s confession to his daughter about his true function in prison shatters the father image she had created and cherished so far. The loss of her sculpture, drowned at the bottom of a lake, parallels now the loss of the father she thought she had: “I have lost my subject, the prisoner father I loved as well as pitied” (31). Like a whirlwind, the Dew Breaker’s own fragmentation reaches and affects not only his daughter but also his wife, whom he met accidentally immediately after having killed the preacher, his last victim. It is only after they had moved together to New York and after their daughter’s birth that he tells his wife the truth about what he had done in prison, thus deepening Ann’s own fragmented subjectivity after the loss of her stepbrother, the slain priest. It is this finding—or its hidden implications—that had made her “[keep] to herself even more than he had, like someone who was nurturing a great pain that she could never speak about” (22). Ann’s dilemma between “regret” and “forgiveness” (242), caught between contradictory feelings which she cannot even openly express, renders her as another dislocated character. Her feelings of love and gratitude collide with the internal burden of knowing who her husband really is while trying to forget about it. Soon after she had met the Dew Breaker, he had helped her to move to New York with him

And he had never killed anyone again... When they arrived in New York and... he introduced her as his wife, she did not disagree. Theirs became a kind of benevolent collaboration, a conspirational friendship. With few others to turn to, it became love. Yes, love. (240)

² Marasa is one of the “loas” or deities in Haitian voodoo and it represents the Twins (Thompson 167) and, by extension, the idea of duality and eclecticism. In “Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness,” Veve Clark adopts this concept for her proposal of a “marasa consciousness,” that is, the reconciliation or combination of binary opposites within the literary tradition of African and Diaspora women authors.

This is the explanation-cum-justification Ann wants to give her daughter when she asks over the phone, “Manman, how do you love him?” (239), but her daughter’s hanging up the phone keeps her answer inside her constructed world of pent-up feelings. Both Ann and her husband are prey to dangerous internal realizations which they refuse to openly admit, perhaps as a way of preserving some kind of sanity in their already dislocated subjectivities:

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.

He endorsed the public story, the one that the preacher had killed himself. And she accepted that he had only arrested him and turned him over to someone else. Neither believing the other nor themselves... (241)

The two characters, the Dew Breaker and his wife, experience a deep feeling of personal estrangement. Such feeling stems not only from the effects of a migration into a new country and the self-imposed banning from Haitian connections or even a possible return, but also from their failure to define their own identity. While Ann “was too busy concentrating on and revising who she was now, or who she wanted to become” (241), her husband’s alienation makes him search for a double, a “ka” or the “good angel” which he finds in his daughter and wife: “he has never wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in any way... he wanted no one to know him, no one except my mother and me, we, who are now his kas, his good angels, his masks against his own face” (34). The Dew Breaker’s fascination with *The Book of the Dead*, from Ancient Egypt, makes him draw his daughter’s name from it. According to Egyptian religious beliefs, the human soul was divided into three parts, one of which was the “ka.” This was the double of a person which acted as its life force, and which lived after the person’s death as long as the body was preserved. Before telling his daughter, Ka, about his true story, the Dew Breaker explains to her why he had named her like that: “ka is like soul...In Haiti is what we call good angel, “ti bon anj.” When you born, I look at your face, I think, here is my ka, my good angel” (17). Both Egyptian religion and Haitian vodou are conflated in the concepts of “ka” and “good angel.” According to Joseph Murphy, in Haitian vodou the human head contains two invisible elements “which might be translated in English as ‘souls,’ but are likened in vodou to angels” (23). These two elements are the “ti bòn anj (ti bon ange), the “little good angel”... the impersonal element of the self which observes and permits self-reflection and self-criticism” and which represents the conscience of a person, and the “gwo bòn anj (gros bon ange) or the “big good angel,” which represents memory and intelligence (23). The birth of his daughter triggers off the activation of the Dew Breaker’s conscience and self-criticism and it is then that he tells his wife about his real job in Haiti. Apart from being considered his double and good angel, Ka creates a ka statue of the Dew Breaker, in the fashion of Ancient Egyptians, who used replicas

of people (“ka statues”) —which were often placed on tombs— to perform rituals on them and thus ensure the life after death or rebirth of the deceased. Although this statue is a copy of the Dew Breaker, it represents him in a subservient position, naked, kneeling down with his back curved and his “downcast eyes” (6) staring at his hands. However, far from being her real father which was the way Ka had imagined him while he was imprisoned. Interestingly enough, the father’s reaction upon seeing the statue is marked by ambivalence and a dual feeling of acceptance and rejection. His initial desire “to be buried with it,” to take the statue with him “into the other world” (17) gives way to his throwing it into the water of a lake. While on the one hand he hankers after that other self that he could have been but was not and which the statue portrays, on the other hand, he destroys it because his heart is too heavy with others’ blood, guilt and remorse to gain entrance into the afterlife. Continuing with *The Book of the Dead*, he mentions the judgement of the dead for Ancient Egyptians: the heart was put on a scale and “If it’s heavy, the heart, then this person cannot enter the other world” (19). It is probably under the full realization of what his life in Haiti has meant that he now inflicts upon himself the negation of redemption and complete forgiveness.

The idea of fragmentation dominates not only the characters of Danticar’s book but also its narrative structure. The book opens with the chapter “The Book of the Dead” where we mainly learn about the Dew Breaker and his family life. The story line about the frustrated phone conversation between his daughter and his wife is interrupted and resumed in the last chapter of the book, directly entitled “The Dew Breaker,” where we can read about his last crime in Haiti. In between the two chapters or stories appear apparently unconnected stories of different Haitian characters whose lives move between Haiti and the United States. “The Book of the Dead” is followed by “Seven,” an account of a couple who finally meets in New York after seven years of geographic separation. It is also about the journey across a set of barriers —economic, social, gender, linguistic, etc.— that immigrants, in this case from Haiti, have to undergo. Eric, Michel and Dany are three young Haitians who share a rented apartment in the basement of the Dew Breaker’s house. Eric finally meets the wife he had left in Haiti until he could get a green card. Like many other immigrants, he has to build his home anew in a strange and often hostile land which, in turn, renders the idea of home a problematic one: “He simply wanted to get her home, if home it was, to that room...” (41). Precarious situation of immigrants in the new country makes him have to work at two jobs to support himself and to send money to his wife in Haiti. Furthermore, the language barrier represents an added problem for those immigrants and also limits the jobs they can have access to. When Eric’s wife joins him in the United States, “he warned her that because she didn’t speak English, she might have to start as a cook in a Haitian restaurant or as a seamstress in a factory” (46).

During his long wait, Eric has relationships with other women, one of whom becomes pregnant and has a miscarriage. The psychological fragmentation produced by abortion joins here the identity fragmentation experienced as an immigrant by this female character, Nadine, in “Water Child.” Her self-imposed silence about her pain and the impossibility to verbally express her experience to her



parents in Haiti, add to her suffering, as she is afraid of talking to them, “thinking her voice might betray all that she could not say” (57). Nadine’s fragmented subjectivity is clearly depicted in the final scene where she faces “a distorted reflection of herself” (68) in the metallic doors of an elevator, while she ponders over her aborted child. The elevator doors act as a mirror where her personal alienation is reflected, and where she cannot recognize herself: “She thought of this for only a moment, then of her parents, of Eric... all of them belonging to the widened unrecognizable woman staring back at her from the closed elevator doors” (68).

The political fragmentation caused by a series of dictatorships in Haiti, especially the regimes of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, and his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, contributed to the dislocation of many lives of Haitians who suffered repression and persecution or were even victims of assassination. In some of her fragmented stories, Danticat intersperses episodes related to these periods of horror, some of which are directly connected to the Dew Breaker as an emblematic figure of such regimes. The activities of the tonton macoutes come to the fore on several occasions either in general or through the Dew Breaker, whose very name attests to the cruelty of his actions: “They’d break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they’d also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they’d take you away” (131). The story in “Night Talkers” is especially poignant in this respect, since it narrates the early bereavement of another one of the Dew Breaker’s young tenants, after his parents are murdered in Haiti by the Dew Breaker himself, who had set his parents’ house on fire and had shot them. In the incident, his aunt became blind and Dany, who was six then, survived the blaze, but became another fragmented man. When he goes to the barbershop and sees the Dew Breaker’s face, a question comes immediately to his mind: “why one single person had been given the power to destroy his entire life” (107). Upon realizing that his landlord and owner of the barbershop and the Haitian macoute who had killed his parents are all the same person, Dany decides to go back to Haiti to tell his aunt about it. However, Dany’s aunt dies while she is sleeping, after they had briefly talked about the possible motives behind his parents’ murder. All that Dany can surmise after such unexpected death is that “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).

The idea of the indelible marks left by the Dew Breaker on his victims, who are haunted by him as if he were a phantom, appears again in “The Bridal Seamstress.” During an interview with a Haitian dress-maker in New York who is about to retire, traumatic traces of the torturer emerge across time and locations. The interviewer, a Haitian intern journalist, comes across a woman who is shattered by the impervious and destructive force of past torture experienced when she was in Haiti, as this woman feels she is still followed by her former torturer, the Dew Breaker, who always becomes her unexpected neighbour, wherever she moves. When the journalist, Aline, finds out that such neighbour does not really exist, she realizes the extent to which an important part of this woman’s life is still dominated by traumatic and frightening memories:



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. (137-138)

“Monkey Tails” focuses on the third young tenant from “Seven,” who had left Haiti when he was twenty and moved to New York. Here the politics of fragmentation are very much determined by the fragmentation of Haitian politics during the Duvalier era and, more specifically, during Baby Doc’s forced exile to France in 1986 after a military coup, a political episode that the narrator puts as follows: “Overnight our country had completely changed. We had fallen asleep under a dictatorship headed by a pudgy thirty-four-year-old man and his glamorous wife. During the night they’d sneaked away...the wife ornately made up... the husband at the wheel of the family’s BMW” (140). Behind him Baby Doc left a 15-year span of oppression and violence and, as the narrator explains, a generation of fragmented “fatherless boys,” victims of political persecution:

I was twelve years old, and, according to my mother, three months before my birth I had lost my father to something my mother would only vaguely describe as “political,” making me part of a generation of mostly fatherless boys, though some of our fathers were still living, even if somewhere else... A great many of our fathers had also died in the dictatorship’s prisons, and others had abandoned us altogether to serve the regime. (141)

One of those fatherless boys, Romain, loses his father to the regime, as he is one of the macoutes, who ends up shooting himself after Duvalier’s exile, in a situation that had turned against the deposed government’s allies. Years of oppression and repression give now way to an explosion of rage and protest on the part of the Haitian population, amidst “the looting of homes and businesses of former government allies, the lynching, burning, and stoning of the macoutes, the thousands of bodies that were suddenly being discovered in secret rooms at the city morgues and in mass graves on the outskirts of the capital” (161-162). As to Michel’s fatherlessness, he finds out later on that his mother’s story about his father is a fabricated “myth” she tells him in order to preserve the true identity of his real father, Monsieur Christophe, who had not recognized him as his son. Speaking from hindsight, eighteen years later, Michel talks about his mother’s death as a probable result of her own fragmentation: “One day she collapsed from what was said to be a heart attack, but what I believe was her heart shattering into little pieces because, unlike me, she had loved Christophe and suffered quietly from his not loving her back” (164). The array of personal fragmentations presented in Michel’s first-person account is framed within a fragmented time line. From the year 1986 there is a sudden move onto the year 2004, when the narrator is thirty years old and is married and just about to be a father himself. Interestingly enough, he records his thoughts into a cassette to keep some kind of testimony for his son and for the future.

The historical and political legacy of bereavement is pointed out again in “The Funeral Singer,” where a group of women talk about the reasons that had



made them leave their Haitian home and migrate to the United States. The narrator's father disappears under strange circumstances, after having been arrested and tortured by one of the macoutes:

I was asked to leave the country by my mother because I wouldn't accept an invitation to sing at the national palace. But I also left because long ago my father had disappeared... One day, one macoute came...and took my father away. When my father returned, he didn't have a tooth left in his mouth. In one night, they'd turned him into an old, ugly man. The next night he took his boat out to sea and, with a mouth full of blood, vanished forever. (172)

It is after her father's disappearance that the narrator begins to sing, as a way of keeping some kind of spiritual contact with him, so that "he could hear me singing his songs from the crest of that wave" (173). Another woman in the group remembers and tells her story of dispossession and sexual oppression in the form of rape. Since her parents cannot afford to bring her up when she is a child, they send her with an aunt who was in charge of a brothel. Only later on, at her aunt's deathbed, is she told that the uniformed man who had walked in her room to rape her one night had threatened to imprison her aunt if she did not consent to his taking the girl that night.

For diverse reasons, connected to the political and economic situation of the country, these women feel forced to leave Haiti and join the number of Haitian immigrants in the United States. As one of them puts it, they have left "terrible days behind" but now they face an "uncertain future" (181). For them, as for the Dew Breaker and many others, Haiti represents a land where they cannot return, a home which can only be remembered and imagined. As Carole B. Davies contends, home turns into a "contradictory" concept, a "contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation" (113). The deep feeling of estrangement triggered by this realization is ironically pointed out by one of the women when she says "Jackie Kennedy can go to Haiti anytime she wants, but we can't" (179). After telling one another about their particular stories of fragmentation, these women join in the nourishing communal singing of old songs, adapting the lyrics to their own purposes: "We sing until our voices grow hoarse, sometimes making Brother Timonie a sister... 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).

Following a circular narrative movement, the story entitled "The Dew Breaker" closes Danticat's book, going back to the period around 1967, in the middle of François Duvalier's dictatorship. While the book opens with the Dew Breaker's daughter's first-person narration about his father and his straight confession about his crimes, it closes with a fragmented third-person account of such crimes, where the Dew Breaker is disclosed not only as a victimizer but also as a victim of the evils of dictatorship:

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)



Despite his desire to abandon his life and move out of the country, to the United States, to start a new and better life, the Dew Breaker follows orders to kill a preacher who used to preach against the regime.³ And he follows such orders on the understanding that if he does not do so, he will probably be done away with, as it had happened to many others who had proved their disloyalty to the president:

The night before, the president of the republic had tried to send a painful message both to people like him and to people like the preacher... announcing the execution of nineteen young officers, members of the palace guard, who the president thought had betrayed him. The president, also known as the Renovator of the Fatherland, had listed the officers' names, roll-call style, on the radio, had answered "absent" for each of them, then had calmly announced, "They have been shot." (188-189)

Before dying, however, the priest imprints on the Dew Breaker's face an indelible mark, a scar, "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 idea of fragmentation dominates as well many of the people in the priest's village, like the shoeshine, Leon, whose son was one of the macoutes and who was said to have almost shot his father, "for a good Volunteer, it was said, should be able to kill his mother and father for the regime" (208), or the priest himself, whose wife had been poisoned most probably due to what her husband said on his radio show, or the priest's sister, whose epileptic seizures had prevented her from saving her small brother from drowning and who imagines she is being possessed by spirits, maybe in an unconscious attempt to escape the threatening reality that surrounds her and her stepbrother.

The Dew Breaker represents Danticat's accomplished delving into the complex politics of fragmentation as lived by many Haitians who had to experience voluntary or forced exile, due mainly to political and economic reasons. Those Haitians become exiled subjectivities not only physically and geographically but also psychologically as they often undergo a process of displacement and alienation. Fragmentation works at both a thematic and structural levels, as we have seen. On the one hand, the Duvaliers' dictatorships deepen the feeling of political, economic and social fragmentation in Haiti and it is in that setting that the story of this tonton macoute, the so-called Dew Breaker, develops as well as the lives of many other characters in the book. On the other hand, the time span covered in the book goes from the 1960s Haiti to present-day New York City but, once again, the author opts for a non-linear narrative whose fragmentation parallels and signals the

³ For an account of some of the evils of the Duvaliers' dictatorships, including François Duvalier's persecution of clergy, see Wucker 115-121.



fragmentation of many Haitian lives. Such a life (that of the Dew Breaker) stands out as a heartrending example of internal alienation and fragmentation which is in urgent need of atonement and redemption. The pendulum between regret and forgiveness that his wife sees oscillating since she learns about her husband's true identity, does not stop moving at the end of the book. Complete catharsis does not seem to be accomplished neither by the Dew Breaker nor by his wife. And as much as they try to reinvent themselves in their new country, they can never completely escape their haunting past. The intricacy and complexity of Danticat's central character attests to the evil consequences of oppressive political regimes, which in their whirlwind of violence and misused power have the dangerous potential to turn their own victims into victimizers. In its depiction of some of the evils of such dictatorships, Danticat's book surely represents not only an implied cry for the redemption of a man, but also a cautionary tale about the sequels to such oppressive governments even across geographic boundaries as well as a reminder of the need for the spiritual liberation of the whole community of Haitians, both inside and outside Haiti.

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