Liberation and Lingering Trauma: U.S. Present and Haitian Past in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*

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On the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus's sonnet "The New Colossus" identifies Lady Liberty as the "Mother of Exiles," proclaiming

... "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (Lazarus 2007, 520)

Although Lady Liberty continues to lift her welcoming torch, its light nowadays increasingly ferrets out the "tired" and the "poor" in order to return them to their dangerous countries of origin, instead welcoming mainly the middle-class and wealthy.

American attitudes toward immigration have never been simple: in 1951, Oscar Handlin declared in his Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history" (Handlin 1951, 3, my emphasis). That history combines a need for cheap labor—from enslaved Africans between the 17th and the 19th century to Chinese railroad workers in the 19th century, and Mexican field workers under the Bracero Program in the 20th century—with xenophobia. Hence, it also includes restrictions on who is allowed into the country. These restrictions range from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the Immigration Act of 1924, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, and the curbing of immigration after September 11, 2001. The fence along much of the U.S. border with Mexico and the many deaths of illegal migrants risking the dangerous Arizona desert crossing are drastic illustrations of the continuing perception of the U.S.A. as the land of opportunity. However, this land provides liberation only selectively.

What each immigrant from a violent, impoverished world experiences, the longing for freedom from torture, poverty, and hunger, can never be achieved

exclusively by what the United States has to offer. From Mary Antin in the early 20th century to Edwidge Danticat in the early 21st century, American narratives of immigration and assimilation have presented the process as neither automatic nor easy. Political and religious freedoms cannot provide release from fear and traumata until the ability to tell and to accept the truth about the traumatic past is developed. Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), a classic account portraying the immersion into U.S. society as an almost religious conversion, is a case in point. The book and its author celebrate George Washington, for he "gave his land its liberty" (Antin 2001, 195) and they ask:

What more could America give a child? Ah, much more! As I read how the patriots planned the Revolution, and the women gave their sons to die in battle, and the heroes led to victory, and the rejoicing people set up the Republic, it dawned on me gradually what was meant by *my country*. The people all desiring noble things, and striving for them together, defying their oppressors, giving their lives for each other—all this it was that made *my country*. (Antin 2001, 190-91, emphasis in the original)

The freedom from oppression to which Antin refers relates to the anti-Semitism suffered in her own Eastern European Jewish past as well as to the U.S.A. as a destination for those trying to escape despotic rule around the world. The rosy picture painted by Antin as well as her sweeping rejection of her Russian Jewish self, the self that remembers being spat on as a Jew, the self that grew up hearing tales of pogroms in which babies were torn apart in front of their mothers, houses burned to the ground, the self that lived daily with fear of the worst, belied her reality though. We know that after a brilliant start as a model student in love with her adopted country and after her total conversion to what she deemed the American way, Antin collapsed into mental illness from which she never recovered, unable to repress any longer her memories of the violent anti-Semitism she had experienced in her Eastern European past. The freedom of the U.S. present could not wipe out the traumata of the Russian past. Her earlier proclamation that through her arrival in the United States she had been "made over" had been premature; a new identity required coming to terms with her past in the first place (Antin 2001, 3).

The sad story of Mary Antin throws into relief the immigrant problem of how to reconcile the unfree and often traumatic past in the migrant's country of origin with her or his new American life. Contemporary immigration narratives like those by Edwidge Danticat tend to recognize the importance of acknowledging the past and of integrating the past with the present by constantly traveling, mentally or geographically, between the old country and the

new America. Often trauma suffered in the past and on the journey enters into accounts of making it to or in the United States. Some recent examples of traumatic narratives of migration to the U.S. include Helena María Viramontes's short story "The Cariboo Café" (1984), Hector Tobar's novel *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) and Cary Joji Fukunaga's film *Sin Nombre* (2009). In all of these narratives, which span the past 30 years, the migrants' point of departure lies in the Americas: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico. Their geographic focus reflects that over the past half-century migration from other parts of the New World to the United States has outnumbered migration from Europe or Asia. Migration from the Caribbean to the U.S.A. also fits into this picture. Because of the histories of violence and dictatorial rule that many parts of the Americas have experienced in the 20th and 21st century, trauma is often part of the cultural baggage that inter-American migrants carry with them.

The desire for a liberation from the history of violence and dictatorial rule that has shaped her native Haiti appears constantly in Edwidge Danticat's writings. Her texts reveal that trauma can never be totally left behind, that no liberation can be accomplished in the promised land without the individual's ability to tell the truth about the past and to find a way of accepting that truth. In Danticat's works, which contain explicit depictions of violence and terror, of the discovery of dark family secrets, of mothers and fathers whose past wreaks havoc on their children, of fears of being found out, of doubt rather than trust, we encounter characters struggling to patch together fragments of an unhappy, violent past from which no liberation can emerge until that past is acknowledged, the secrets are shared, guilt and victimhood are articulated, and the pieces are put together. A daughter discovers that she was conceived in a rape. A father reveals to his daughter that he tortured victims himself rather than having fled from a torture prison. Danticat makes it clear that such bitter truths need to be acknowledged rather than repressed in order for the individual to be able to move on into a more liberated state of being.

Her fiction is replete with examples of suffering and trauma. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), a child is separated without warning or preparation from a beloved aunt, discovers she bears the face of her mother's rapist, finds she must take care of her mother rather than relying on her for protection, and submits to brutal vaginal "testing" in order to prove her virginity. From the desperate voyage of the Haitian boat people in *Krik? Krak!* (1996) to the ethnic strife and torture in *The Farming of Bones* (1998), from the history of an uncle dying in United States detention by the Department of Homeland Security in *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) to the portrayal of a Haitian town community marked by loss in *Claire of the Sea* (2013), Danticat depicts the will to come to terms with horrors and traumatic experiences.

In her narratives the migration from the Caribbean to the United States is triggered by the terror regime of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier in Haiti between 1957 and 1986.¹ As she said in an interview, the Haiti in which she spent her childhood and that nation’s violent history play a major role in her work: “while I have left Haiti, it’s never left me” (Adisa 2009, 345). Haiti is linked to community, but also to terror. Writing about the pain connected to her country of origin also has a therapeutic function for Danticat, who states: “My work allows me to exorcise my ghosts. I purge the pain from it. The words are my tears on the page” (Adisa 2009, 353).

Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* (2004) depicts the United States as a place of new beginnings—not necessarily welcoming, but still a refuge in the sense that the individual is free from state persecution and torture and can hope for a gradual healing of the wounds of the violent past. When the unnamed wife in the episode “Seven” arrives at New York’s JFK Airport from Port-au-Prince to be picked up by her husband, whom she had not seen in seven years, she symbolically relinquishes the accessories of her former life at customs: “the mangoes, sugarcane, avocados, the grapefruit-peel preserves, the peanut, cashew, and coconut confections, the coffee beans, which he [the customs official] threw into a green bin decorated with fruits and vegetables with red lines across them” as well as the “small packet of trimmed chicken feathers” she had brought for sexual stimulation (Danticat 2004, 40).² After this metaphoric shedding of her old life tied to Haiti, her new life grounded in the United States can begin. Symbolically, there is a threshold to cross:

suddenly she found herself before a door that slid open by itself, parting like a glass sea, and as she was standing there, blinking through the nearly blinding light shining down on the large number of people who had come to meet loved ones with flowers and placards and stuffed animals, the door closed again and when she moved a few steps forward it opened, and then she saw him. He charged at her and wrapped both his arms around her. And as he held her, she felt her feet leave the ground. It was when he put her back down that she finally believed she was really somewhere else, on another soil, in another country. (40–41)

1 It is estimated that 30,000 Haitians were murdered during the reign of these two dictators (Ibarrola Armendariz 2010, 32).

2 All subsequent quotations from Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* will be indicated only by page number.

The arrival is full of wonder and hope; the reunion with the husband promises the chance of a new start, something like the ‘make-over’ that Mary Antin mentions. While the new territory is at first disorienting and while she is initially afraid of leaving their room for fear of getting lost in the city, the wife gradually comes to feel more comfortable and liberated in the United States.

Danticat contrasts the lack of freedom in dictatorial Haiti to the liberation that seems possible in the U.S.A.: recalling the dictator François Duvalier threatening in a long speech that “blood would flow in Haiti as never before” if anyone tried to topple him (193), she presents the United States as a place offering shelter from past terror and present trauma. Her story cycle focuses less on past events than it does on living and coping with the Haitian past in the U.S. present. It is less about justice than it is about reconciliation. As Danticat once said, she does not set out to write Haitian history, but she “like[s] to write characters that are touched by it” (Adisa 2009, 352). In *The Dew Breaker* the liberation that is possible in the U.S. present (for both survivors and former torturers) is coupled with lingering trauma caused by the Haitian past. The liberation process requires communication with family or community; it is a long or even a life-long endeavor, involving struggle, continuous effort, and great emotional cost.

The Dew Breaker distinguishes itself from earlier, idealizing depictions of the U.S.A. (like Antin’s *Promised Land*) first through its form: the book has been called an episodic novel or a collection of nine interrelated stories.³ Each story or episode appears distinct, and the reader understands only by the very end of the book that the nine narratives are interlaced and that the fragments of the past patchwork have been quilted into a cycle. Second, the book blurs the distinction between perpetrator and victim of a terror regime. It offers insights into the traumata of both the former torturers and those who were at their mercy (as for example in “Night Talkers”). And third, the book might be placed in the tradition of Helen Epstein’s groundbreaking study, *Children of the Holocaust* (1979), which first drew attention to the ways in which the

3 Rebecca Fuchs opts for the characterization of *The Dew Breaker* as a story cycle that highlights fragmentation and interdependence. She points out “the tension between coherence and fragmentation as both the challenge and the decolonial potential of Caribbean thinking. This tension formally prevents a dominant narrative voice and order from controlling the reading process, which *The Dew Breaker* exemplifies both within its story chapters and with the form of the story cycle. By letting different narrators and focalizers speak in each story chapter, Danticat forces readers to constantly change their perspectives and to give up a comfortable overview in favor of a multiperspectival or prismatic view” (Fuchs 2014, 161).

trauma of a people is handed down from parent to child. In focusing on the next generation, Danticat illustrates the struggle of a daughter to reconcile the father whom she believed to be a victim with his confession that he was in fact a torturer.

The book starts and ends in the present and goes back to the recent and more remote past in the narratives in between. The focus of the initial episode is on the Haitian American Ka, a sculptor born in the United States who has never been to Haiti, and her parents, the barber Bienaimé and the beautician Anne, who fled to Brooklyn from Haiti some thirty-seven years earlier. Both parents avoid social contact and both are traumatized by their experiences under the Duvalier regime: Anne goes to church compulsively every day, and Bienaimé has frequent nightmares and is marked by a deep, long, “ropelike scar” in his face (5).⁴ His daughter idolizes him and chooses him as the “single subject” of her sculptures, which represent him “the way I had imagined him in prison” (4, 6)

As father and daughter are on their way from Brooklyn to Florida in a rental car to deliver Ka's best statue to a Haitian-American actress, Bienaimé disappears and dumps the statue in a lake. Afterwards, he explains to his daughter his sense of unworthiness:

“Ka, I don't deserve a statue,” he says again, this time much more slowly, “not a whole one, at least. You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey.” ... “Ka, I was never in prison,” he says.... “I was working in the prison,” my father says. (20, 21)

His former position as a Tonton Macoute, a government agent, interrogator, and torturer is the secret he has hidden from her all his life. His nightmares are of torturing prisoners rather than of being tortured himself and his scar stems from the last prisoner he interrogated and killed rather than from someone working for the Duvalier regime. Therefore, as Rebecca Fuchs points out, the “‘man-made,’ ‘muddy and dark’ (DB 15) lake [into which Bienaimé dumps the statue] is a metaphorical space of artificial ‘un/memory’ where the dew breaker [ie, the torturer] hides his past and his repressed guilt” (Fuchs 2014, 143).

4 Melissa D. Birkhofer characterizes Bienaimé's scar as “evidence,” as “a physical/visual signifier” of “a past of which he is ashamed ... [and] of which he does not want to be reminded” (Birkhofer 2008, 49, 48).

For Danticat, the line between perpetrator and victim is never distinct. Perpetrators, like Bienaimé, she suggests, are not necessarily born bad but they, too, have a history that explains their later decisions.⁵ We find out that Bienaimé's family also suffered greatly as a consequence of François Duvalier becoming president of Haiti: they "had lost all their land soon after the Sovereign One had come to power in 1957, when a few local army officials decided they wanted to build summer homes there. Consequently his father had gone mad and his mother had simply disappeared" (191). After joining the *Miliciens*, which were to become the *Tonton Macoutes*, the growing sense of power corrupts Bienaimé: he accepts free clothes from merchants, rooms free of charge from his landlord, and free meals at restaurants because "he enjoyed watching his body grow wider and meatier just as his sense of power did" (196). During the Duvalier terror regime Bienaimé rises in the state machinery of military and secret police to become a feared agent and interrogator, for whom torture is a habitual activity in which he excels. As a *Tonton Macoute* he is cold-blooded. Locally the members of this brigade were referred to as "dew breakers," a Creole expression for those who destroy the peacefulness of the morning dew on the grass (see also Bellamy 2012, 185). Hence the title of Danticat's book and of its concluding episode.

Bienaimé's secret is intertwined with that of his wife, Anne: it turns out that her stepbrother, a Baptist minister critical of the Duvalier regime, was Bienaimé's last prisoner, who fought back and gave Bienaimé the deep scar; he was the last person Bienaimé killed. Anne's decision to team up and stay with Bienaimé may represent her unconscious attempt to reach her dead stepbrother, to be close to him, even if the only way she could manage that was by marrying the man who murdered him. She may also see her resolve to forgive and reform Bienaimé as penance for having been unable in her childhood to save her little brother from drowning because an epileptic seizure had made her unable to help him. A life centered on devotions that block out memory and thought—mass every morning, prayers daily—limits her enjoyment of the America in which she has never, in her heart, really arrived. In this respect Anne resembles Beatrice, the title character of "The Bridal Seamstress," who compulsively stitches together wedding dresses, while the soles of her feet, which are "thin and sheer like an albino baby's skin," mark her as a torture victim (131).

5 Hannah Arendt's sense of the banality of evil—the ordinary man or woman divorcing themselves from empathy, or failing to think, or slipping effortlessly into depersonalizing their prey—hovers over these pages.

Ka's parents avoid talking about their terrible memories and guilt by isolating themselves, and by compulsively engaging in their daily activities. After she has asked her father to explain what he means by having been the "hunter, ... not the prey," Ka herself regrets the question and dreads the answer that may destroy her blissful ignorance:

Is he going to explain why he and my mother have no close friends, why they've never had anyone over to the house, why they never speak of any relatives in Haiti or anywhere else, or have never returned there or, even after I learned Creole from them, have never taught me anything else about the country beyond what I could find out on my own, on the television, in newspapers, in books? Is he about to tell me why Manman is so pious? Why she goes to daily Mass? I am not sure I want to know anything more than the little they've chosen to share with me all these years, but it is clear to me that he needs to tell me, has been trying to for a long time. (20-21)

Because of their post-traumatic stress disorder and their feeling of guilt Ka's parents had never been able to enjoy the freedom of the United States for fear of being found out, for fear of running into someone they had known in Haiti. They feel unworthy because they cannot bear to face their (Haitian) past, which renders them unable to live in the (U.S.) present. As William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951): "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Similarly, Danticat told an interviewer: "The past is always with us. History is, after all, just another story" (Adisa 2009, 352). Therefore Ka's parents imprison themselves mentally and shut themselves off socially, living in their own closed worlds of religion and small business. In the episode "Night Talkers," Ka's father, working as a barber, is described as someone who "never made conversation" (106). He also does not want to be photographed: "I had hoped to take some pictures of him on this trip," recalls Ka in the opening narrative, "but he hadn't let me.... He didn't want any more pictures taken of him for the rest of his life, he said, he was feeling too ugly" (5). Unbeknownst to Ka, the reason behind her father's self-loathing is not primarily his prominent physical scar but his feeling of guilt about his violent past. His lingering trauma stands in the way of love and true liberation. While his name, "Bienaimé, meaning well-loved" points to the love that his wife and daughter feel for him, he can never love himself. The multiperspectivism of *The Dew Breaker* makes it possible for Danticat to present Bienaimé as a complex and ambivalent figure—ambivalent to himself, his wife and daughter, and the people around him (like Dany in "Night Talkers," who has the chance to avenge his parents by killing him [Bienaimé] but decides

not to). As Rebecca Fuchs states, “The dew breaker’s victims, his family members, as well as his own focalization depict him as both, loved and hated, guilty and repentant, violent and suffering. As a result, the story cycle is a dialogue between different voices that may contradict each other, which prevents the establishment of hierarchies and control” (Fuchs 2014, 162).

Trauma theory speaks of “acting out” and “working through” as reactions to post-traumatic stress disorder. While “acting out” prevents acknowledging painful memories by symbolically reenacting them, “working through” implies facing and communicating the traumatic experiences. An initial step in “working through” Bienaimé’s own violent past is his interest in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, an exhibit on burial rituals at the Brooklyn Museum, to which he takes his daughter every week. The artifacts offer him a chance to disclose a hint of his past to his daughter (see also Bellamy 2012, 184).⁶ Still, he feels fragmented and incomplete, telling his daughter: “Ka, I am like one of those statues” in the Egyptian exhibit that have pieces missing (19). Being liberated from the immediate terrors of violence in Haiti, he can subsequently “act out” in his drastic decision to dump his daughter’s idealizing statue of him in a lake. After acting out, he can continue to work through his lingering trauma. Revealing to his daughter his complicity in Haiti’s dictatorial regime, he begins to free himself, while burdening her with a truth she wants to reject, yet must in some way have sensed. As his wife tells their daughter, “What he told you, he want to tell you for long time [*sic*]” (240). There is a sense that such a revelation would not have been possible in Haiti with its omnipresent regime and the constant need to be on guard; only the geographical distance from the former location of terror and from the origin of his trauma as well as the freedom and leisure that the United States provide make it possible for Bienaimé to work through his guilt.

The liberation that Ka’s father achieves comes in stages. First he leaves the barracks/prison he has been working in after his mistake of killing the prisoner who had wounded him in the face and whom he had actually been ordered to set free. Then the prisoner’s stepsister runs into him and, seeing his deep wound, asks “What did they do to *you*?” (237). His reaction: “This was the most forgiving question he’d ever been asked. It suddenly opened a door, produced

6 As Maria Rice Bellamy remarks: “His study of the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and burial rituals enables Bienaimé to ennoble death, appreciate its gravity, and mourn the lives he ended. This process offers him a small measure of peace regarding his violent past by enabling him to project his inner turmoil outward and externalize his contemplation of violence and death. These trips to the museum are Bienaimé’s first, tentative efforts to reveal aspects of himself to his daughter” (Bellamy 2012, 184).

a small path, which he could follow. 'I'm free,' he said, 'I finally escaped' " (237). This response turns out to be more true than he realizes. "In many ways it was true. He had escaped from his life. He could no longer return to it, no longer wanted to" (237). His fateful shooting of his last prisoner had disqualified him as a collaborator of the terror regime and had thus freed him from working as an interrogator and torturer. The question of his future wife frees him from the role of perpetrator and opens up the possibility of assumed victimhood, of an assumed identity free of the sins of his past. In the process, Anne is freed, too. When the two first collide with each other, we read that "she looked shell-shocked and insane" (236). All this changes as the United States, the land of the free, comes into the picture. We find out that Bienaimé used his stow-away money to get them two airline tickets to New York. But the change of location does not yet lead to an immediate release, merely to a "conspirational friendship" that eventually "became love" (240). Both husband and wife are rendered silent by trauma; they dare not address each other's past for fear of having their suspicions confirmed. Rather than facing their history they try to repress it. The birth of "their Ka, their good angel" brings about slow change, as they need to talk about practicalities concerning the baby (241) and as they expect their daughter to act as a kind of savior. Still, the repressed memory and suspicion and the façades they have chosen to uphold keep both Bienaimé and Anne unfree: "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). A lasting change does not occur until Bienaimé "acts out" by destroying the idealizing statue and then, in conversation with his daughter, works through his former implication with the Tonton Macoutes. Until that point, Ka's parents had performed false selves, denying their past.

Nonetheless, Bienaimé continues to be plagued by his guilt and his fears of being recognized.⁷ Once he arrived at the house of the actress to whom they were supposed to deliver the statue, he still conceals his origins: "Mr. Fontenau asks my father where he is from in Haiti, and my father lies. In the past, I thought he always said he was from a different province each time

7 Aitor Ibarrola Armendariz focuses on the victims of the terror regime and Danitcat's representation of their "individual and collective dysfunctions" (Ibarrola Armendariz 2010, 23). He rightly points out that Dantecat also engages with the dysfunctions of the former perpetrator, Bienaimé, and with the strain that his guilt exerts on his wife and daughter, arguing 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" (Ibarrola Armendariz 2010, 41).

because he'd really lived in all of those places, but I realize now that he says this to reduce the possibility of anyone identifying him, even though thirty-seven years and a thinning head of widow-peaked salt-and-pepper hair shield him from the threat of immediate recognition" (28). The liberation that life in the United States has granted him is only tenuous; it requires continuous caution and effort.

Avoidance strategies and attempts at silencing are even more pronounced with Ka's mother, Anne, who carries her own burden of guilt for crimes she never committed. Ka wonders: "Was she huntress or prey? A thirty-year plus disciple of my father's coercive persuasion? She'd kept to herself even more than he had, like someone who was nurturing a great pain that she could never speak about" (22). Only much later in the book, in the concluding episode entitled "The Dew Breaker" and subtitled "Circa 1967," will we find out that Bienaimé's last victim was the stepbrother of the woman who smashed into him that night as she was charging in the direction of the barracks/prison, the woman who nursed his wounds and who moved to the United States with him and became his wife.

Anne's liberation likewise occurs in stages and involves setbacks.⁸ We find out that she had been suffering from epileptic seizures since childhood, thought of as ghosts that possessed her. The last seizure, however, occurs the night that her stepbrother is taken away (242). But even after Anne arrives in the United States, the Haitian past still imprisons her: she finds solace in her daily routine and shuts herself off from society. "[A] hollow grief extended over all these years, a penance procession that has yet to end" (238)—a clear sign of lingering trauma and shame. In the episode "The Book of Miracles," Anne's regrets at her and her husband's secretiveness becomes apparent: attending Christmas Eve mass with her husband and daughter and seeing "people greeting one another around her..., [Anne began] to rethink the decision she and her husband had made not to get close to anyone who might ask too many questions about his past" (76). Spotting a WANTED poster for another former Tonton Macoute, she realizes her ongoing lack of liberation because of the "kinship of shame and guilt that she'd inherited by marrying her husband" (81). As "the wife of a man like her husband, [Anne felt that she] didn't have the same freedom to condemn as her daughter did" (81). Also, she would like to tell her daughter of "the simple miracle of her husband's transformation [from torturer to loving caregiver], but of course she

8 Ibarrola Armendariz has drawn attention to the wavering in Anne's development that is unlike Bienaimé's straightforward admission to this daughter. He speaks of Anne's "vertiginous oscillation between 'forgiveness and regret'" (Ibarrola Armendariz 2010, 47).

couldn't, at least not yet" (72–73). Only as time goes by does Anne realize the chances of re-making herself that the United States offers: "She was too busy concentrating on and revising who she was now, or who she wanted to become" (241). It is not until her husband tells their daughter that he was a Tonton Macoute that Anne can genuinely start to enjoy the liberation of her U.S. present.

But even once Bienaimé has confessed his secret to his daughter, the beginning liberation is not an automatic matter; it needs continuous work. As Anne realizes, she has to do "[a]nything to keep them both talking" (242). Liberation involves responsibility: "There was no way to escape this dread anymore, 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). Anne continues to suffer from "dread," "regret," and "fright," but there is also "forgiveness." Her "fright ... that the people closest to her were always disappearing" clearly stems from her experiences with Haiti's dictatorial rule, mainly the 'disappearance' of her stepbrother into a prison compound, never to be heard from again. But as Danticat explained in an interview, she is most interested in strategies of coming to terms with the painful past, primarily love. This is why she called *The Dew Breaker* "a story about love, love between a father and daughter, and love between a husband and a wife, who were not supposed to have ever met, who were never supposed to be together, star-crossed lovers of the highest degree. It is indeed a story about fate, fate that sometimes brings about the kind of love we never [expect],⁹ about connections that rise out of desperation and indeed need" (Adisa 2009, 350).

Like her parents, Ka is also in pain: her relationship to her parents' traumata is best understood as postmemory (Hirsch 2008);¹⁰ she is a second-generation victim of Haiti's dictatorship, who "suffers the trauma of being raised by traumatized parents" (Bellamy 2012, 178). Although postmemory's

9 The published interview reads "the kind of love we never accept," which is probably a transcription error.

10 Marianne Hirsch explains the term as follows: "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 2008, 103). She coined this term to explain the experience of people like herself: those raised by Holocaust survivors whose lives have not been touched literally by that trauma but have nevertheless been dominated by it due to their intimate connection to parents who pass residual traumata on to their children verbally and through their actions.

relation to the traumatic past begins with gaps, silences, and repressions in her parents' personal histories, other sources (which Hirsch calls "structures of mediation")—including historical records, cultural artifacts, images, documents, and narratives—fill some of the empty spaces in the traumatic history and bring members of the postmemorial generation (like Ka) closer to understanding their inheritance (Hirsch 2008, 115). Their engagement with survivor memory and additional sources of information can result in postmemorial work—personal and often artistic re-creations of the traumatic past—that "strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* ... memorial structures" (Hirsch 2008, 111, emphasis in the original).

Members of the generation of postmemory turn to research and imagination to work through and rearticulate their traumata. In this process, they produce consciously constructed and improvised histories that cannot be considered complete or strictly true, yet those histories serve an important function in facilitating healing or at least in conveying a sense of mastery over the haunting effects of inherited traumatic memory (Bellamy 2012, 178–79). In Ka's case, choosing her father as the subject she wants to recreate imaginatively (as a tortured prisoner) in her art expresses her desire to understand him and his secrets and so to be close to him. Her art shows how much she is affected by her father's trauma and guilt, of which she is not aware. Bienaimé's "acting out" and "working through" explains the mysteries that she had not been able to figure out and it relativizes her idolizing of her father.

Thus the opening episode, "The Book of the Dead," also functions as an initiation narrative, in which Ka gains knowledge that changes her outlook on life. She gains distance as well as insight. At the beginning of the story, when Ka calls the police because her father has disappeared from their motel room without leaving any message, she still feels a need for a close connection to her parents. So when she is at the police station, she passes off her parents' birthplace as her own:

"Where are you and your daddy from, Ms. Bienaimé?" Officer Bo asks, doing the best he can with my last name. He does such a lousy job that, even though he and I and Salinas are the only people in Salinas' office, at first I think he's talking to someone else.

I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never been to my parents' birthplace. Still, I answer "Haiti" because it is one more thing I've always longed to have in common with my parents. (3-4)

Ka's longing for (preserving) a close connection to her parents makes her accept their ways uncritically and colors her view of them. Therefore the statue she

made of her father represented him the way she “had imagined him in prison” (6). Unbeknownst to her, he is indeed in the prison of his repressed memories (see also Bellamy 2012, 185). After his confession she experiences a sense of loss and needs to revise the victimhood she had projected onto her father. As she realizes: “I don’t know that I will be able to work on anything for some time. I have lost my subject, the prisoner father I loved as well as pitied” (31). The conclusions about her father that she had drawn from imagining him in this way likewise need to be revised. What she may have interpreted as humility in her father may actually have been self-loathing and fear:

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 any way. (34)

What had appeared to her as puzzling behavior earlier on makes sense in view of the new information Ka has received about her father. In the fashion of the protagonist of an initiation story, she has gained knowledge that raises her level of understanding while taking away her innocence.

Each of the three family members has his or her own trauma to deal with, which makes the Bienaimé family, according to Bellamy, “a microcosm for the larger Haitian community seeking to work through its traumatic legacy” (Bellamy 2012, 180). In Kezia Page’s view, *The Dew Breaker* illustrates “the impossibility of a safe manoeuvring of emotional minefields planted in Haiti and transplanted in the United States” (Page 2011, 230). Similar to Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, the individual is less to blame for the atrocities committed under a terror regime than the regime itself—slavery in the case of *Beloved* and a dictatorship in the case of *The Dew Breaker*.¹¹ In both cases, healing can only start once the terror regime has been overcome; and healing requires confession, communication and the acceptance by a community. In the case of Haiti, writes Édouard Glissant, centuries of atrocities, exploitation

11 Birgit Spengler offers a convincing reading of *The Dew Breaker* as an intervention in political and historical developments and thus as a work of “potentially life-saving engaged art” (Spengler 2014, 191).

and terror ever since Columbus landed on Hispaniola in December of 1492 have prevented a sense of a shared history and have instead resulted in what Glissant calls a “nonhistory” (Glissant 1997, 62; see also Ibarrola Armendariz 2010, 26). The resulting national fragmentation complicates dealing with the past.

The Dew Breaker reenacts this fragmentation in its narrative form, where it is at first difficult to identify the individual episodes as pieces in the bigger picture. Danticat herself remarked in *Create Dangerously* that she intended for *The Dew Breaker* “to be neither a novel nor a story collection, but something in between” (Danticat 2010, 62). As Maria Rice Bellamy writes, “[t]he fragmented form of the text mirrors the fragmented and scarred Haitian people, whose nation has been fraught with political instability and violence nearly since its founding in 1804” (Bellamy 2012, 177).¹² Context and causality need to be established by the reader. In the episode “Night Talkers,” for example, it is at first not evident that the man whom the protagonist Dany recognizes in Brooklyn is Bienaimé. But gradually we realize that Ka’s father probably killed Dany’s parents in Haiti by burning their house down and that he is responsible for Dany’s aunt having lost her eyesight (97). This aunt saved Dany as a child by sending him to live in the United States: “she’d insisted that he go so he would be as far away as possible from the people who’d murdered his parents” (115). Both aunt and nephew are traumatized by the atrocities committed against them and their loved ones, as is shown in their nightmares and their shared habit of talking in their sleep:

In the dark, listening to his 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

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- 12 As Birgit Spengler points out, the novel’s narrative form asks the reader to function as what she calls “an ersatz trauma worker”: “It is the reader’s task to piece together the broken narrative that constitutes *The Dew Breaker*—to turn the short story collection into a fragmented novel—and to fathom the depths of experiences that are related by proxy, that is, by using representatives of the violated bodies and psyches that reveal the characters’ suffering symbolically. In this attempt, the reading experience resembles a victim’s ways of coping with trauma, and a therapist’s attempt to make sense of its symptoms. As readers, we do not simply read about the characters’ encounters with violence and their individual attempts of coping, but are directly engaged in the attempt to make sense of terror and chaos, to ‘decipher’ the symptoms of trauma the text enacts” (Spengler 2014, 195–96).

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. (98-99)

While the aunt represses the memory of the regime that took away her eyesight as well as her brother and sister-in-law, Dany at first seeks revenge, unable and unwilling to let go of his traumatic memories. He rents a room in Bienaimé's basement—ostensibly in order to be able to kill him but subconsciously probably in order to be able to figure out why Bienaimé had wiped out his family. But in his case the atmosphere of liberation of the United States, the geographic and temporal distance from the traumatic events, and the desire not to reproduce the violence of the former terror regime make it possible to forego revenge. Having intruded into Bienaimé's bedroom with the intent to kill him, i.e., to "act out" his grief in a murder, looking at the sleeping man who is now at his mercy encourages Dany to "work through" his trauma and thus overcome the cycle of terror:

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)

Dany realizes that while the past cannot be undone, avenging the atrocities of the past would only continue the cycle of violence and might repeat the tragic mistakes that the Haitian terror regime had been guilty of (Dany's aunt believes that her brother "was taken for someone else," 109). Dany's decision not to kill Bienaimé is a sign of his beginning liberation from the family's and the nation's past.¹³ It also exemplifies Glissant's poetics of relation, according to which only relations and connection can help transform mentalities and

13 The story also presents a character who cannot handle the responsibility of liberation: Dany finds out that 19 year-old Claude, who had been living in New York with his father, got involved in drugs, shot his father over drugs when he was 14, and was deported back to Haiti. Unlike Dany and Ka, Claude remains caught in the destructive impulses of postmemory.

societies.¹⁴ Asked about the ability of some of her characters to forego revenge, Danticat answered: “The only way I feel I can explain something like this and the only way I approach an explanation in this book is that the murderer or torturer has a piece of that person’s loved one that the [person]¹⁵ knows that he or she no longer has. The murderer or torturer was the last to see that person alive. Forgiveness, an act of erasure of the last fatal act, is maybe a way of reclaiming that person again” (Adisa 2009, 351).

Coming to terms with the traumatic past does not happen automatically for any terror victim. For example, the concluding narrative in the collection mentions a Haitian woman in Florida who continues being dysfunctional thirty years after what she had to endure:

When one of the women who had been his prisoners 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. (198)

The torture to which she had been subjected by Bienaimé for not revealing her husband’s whereabouts continues to block her memory. Similarly, for the three exiled Haitian women in “The Funeral Singer” there are traumatic events that their memories cannot access: “Life is full of dead spots” (169). Nonetheless, by sharing their experiences with each other, the three women can cope better with their situations: “I [i.e., Freda] thought exposing a few details of my life would inspire them [i.e., the other two women, Mariselle and Rézia] to do the same and slowly we’d parcel out our sorrows, each walking out with fewer than we’d carried in” (170). In this way, they gradually slip into a talking cure. But other characters, like Nadine Osnac, the protagonist of “Water Child,” do not find such company and solace; they remain unable to communicate their

14 Jo Collins argues that in *The Dew Breaker* and in Danticat’s work in general relations define identity more than locations do, noting that with regard to the book’s diasporic community “Danticat seeks to unsettle notions of ‘origin’ and sees that ‘home’ can reside in multiple locales.” Accordingly, her depiction of a Haitian diasporic community “accentuates plurality and irresolution” and foregrounds “silence, isolation, and uncertainty” (Collins 2012, 136, 137).

15 The published interview reads “that the loved one knows that he or she no longer has,” which is probably a transcription error.

trauma.¹⁶ Putting painful, traumatic experiences into words and sharing those experiences with others, Danticat stated in an interview with reference to *The Farming of Bones*, leads the way to resilience: “the story,” she said, “the telling, is meant as a path towards healing. The pain goes into the telling of the story” (Adisa 2009, 350). In order to underline that there is indeed a “path towards healing” Danticat prefers to speak not of “victims” but of “survivors.”

The liberation of the U.S. present is contrasted to what may have been considered freedom in the Haitian past. As Anne’s stepbrother is led to the interrogator’s office, we read: “Some of the prisoners whispered, ‘Bonne chance.’ They also thought him lucky. He was going to be released or he was going to die. Either way, he was going to be free” (221). Such freedom from pain, the story implies, is a far cry from the potential liberation that the United States may offer. It merely means a halt of the process in which “[t]hey were being destroyed piece by piece, day by day, disappearing like the flesh from their bones” (225). While survival meant more pain for the terror victims in Haiti’s prisons (to the point that they prefer death), the chance of a new life in the United States involves pain of a different kind (like Dany’s nightmares in “Night Talkers,” the fear of being recognized that plagues those like Bienaimé who were complicit with the terror regime, or the guilt of those like Anne who did nothing to bring the perpetrators to justice).

Meeting in a liminal situation, bonding over their status as outcasts, boarding a plane to the United States, and starting a new life together constitute a kind of reinvention for Bienaimé and Anne. Similarly, Mary Antin writes in *The Promised Land* about her move to the United States: “I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over ... I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell” (Antin 2001, 3). The potential for this make-over in the cases of Antin, Anne, and Bienaimé lies in the opportunities that the U.S.A. offers those fleeing from oppression, especially in the freedom from state terror. But for none of these three characters does the new life in the United States mean starting from scratch: the lingering memory of the pain that had preceded this life in the United States will continue to affect them and their descendants consciously and subconsciously.

By illustrating how the U.S. environment can help characters come to terms with their post-traumatic stress disorder and by opposing the violence of the Haitian past to the liberation of the U.S. present Edwidge Danticat upholds the notion propounded by Emma Lazarus of the U.S.A. as a refuge for those “yearning to breathe free,” for those whose places of origin become unlivable for them, the

16 Nonetheless, Nadine ends up finding comfort in assisting and consoling others.

“wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” But especially in the post-9/11 era this notion of a welcoming ‘land of the free’ cannot be taken for granted, as Danticat illustrates in her autobiographical account *Brother, I’m Dying*. In this book she tells the story of her 81 year-old uncle who had raised her for eight years in Haiti after her parents had departed for the United States. Having lost his voice to throat cancer, the uncle is unable to make himself understood as he is trying to join Danticat’s family in the U.S.A., asking for temporary asylum until he can return to tumultuous Haiti. Detained by U.S. Customs, interrogated by the Department of Homeland Security, whose medical examiner alleges that the old man is faking his vomiting and collapse, the uncle dies in custody. The national trauma of 9/11 as well as negligence and overprotectiveness, Danticat makes clear, are threatening the ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ that had so long been upheld by the United States. Her writing faces that truth, while she continues to work for a brighter future. As Edwidge Danticat told an interviewer, “you can’t be human and not also hope, so we go on hoping” (Adisa 2009, 346).

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