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the death of trauma:

Mourning and Healing in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*

Marinda Quist

A trauma narrative, Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* shows the suffering of people from Haiti who have lived under the corrupt regime of the Duvaliers. Because of the cultural trauma caused by the corruption of the government, the novel and the characters in the novel are preoccupied by the topic of suffering, death, and recovering from traumatic events. In one of the sections, called "The Funeral Singer," Freda explains that there are three types of death: "The one when our breath leaves our bodies to rejoin the air, the one when we are put back in the earth, and the one that will erase us completely and no one will remember us at all" (Danticat 177). Freda's three stages of death signify the process that a family must enact as they mourn the loss of a loved one. They also correspond with the three stages that a person must go through to heal from trauma they have suffered, or for the trauma to symbolically die. These corresponding stages include voicing the trauma, taking action, and forgetting. By showing that the stages of death function in the process of mourning the loss of a loved one and by presenting these stages of healing as a model for the characters in the novel to heal from their own trauma,

the novel suggests that healing from life-altering trauma is possible. To show this connection, I will first demonstrate how Freda's three stages of death are necessary in the mourning of a literal death and then relate these stages to the metaphorical mourning of trauma.

The Dew Breaker, written in 2004, is often called a short story cycle because it is composed of nine separate stories that each has its own plot. The novel tells the stories of several characters who have suffered at the hands of the dew breaker and portrays them in the aftermath of the trauma as they go through the process of healing and remembering, trying to live a life free from the trauma of the past, and mourning the loss of a loved one. Though each section of the book follows different, seemingly unconnected, characters in various stages of life and in various places including the United States and Haiti, the characters are all connected in some way to the dew breaker who the audience first encounters as the father of Ka. I will focus in particular on the stories which deal directly with Ka and her father (the dew breaker), including "The Book of the Dead" and "The Dew Breaker" which frame the novel; and I will also address the stories of "Night Talkers," "The Book of Miracles," "The Funeral Singer," and "The Bridal Seamstress."

Each of the stories in the novel shows the trauma experienced by the characters. This trauma creates significant psychological damage beyond what may be considered normal life events and sorrow. The distress of the traumatic event leaves victims with a disturbed sense of self and sense of their lives. Kathie J. Albright, Colette H. Duggan, and Marcy J. Epstein explain, "The narrative nature of daily life is breached. Trauma produces a rupture in the life story line of its victims and, as a result, survivors find it difficult, if not impossible, to untangle the now snarled or clipped threads of stories so as to create a new overarching story that makes sense to them" (400). Trauma, then, not only makes it difficult for victims to voice their suffering, but also to create a narrative of their lives as the trauma increasingly shapes the way they understand their lives and the way in which they act on this understanding after the traumatic event.

Through Freda's comment on the three stages of death, the novel demonstrates that mourning the loss of loved ones and finding peace in their deaths acts as a model for the process of healing from trauma. By contrasting Dany's experiences of mourning someone's death in "Night Talkers" with Anne's experiences with mourning in "The Book of Miracles," the novel expresses the great need of characters to have peaceful mourning at the death of a loved one. Dany experiences this peaceful mourning when he returns to Haiti to visit his aunt

Estina and witnesses her death during his visit. As the only formal funeral in this novel among so many deaths, the funeral offers insight into elements that contribute to the process of mourning and healing. In particular, the funeral suggests that certain elements, such as the rituals of branding the final clothes (or cutting the clothes to signify that the person has passed away), and holding a wake, are necessary to the process of mourning to both prepare the dead for afterlife and prepare the living for peace in losing their loved one. In Dany's case, the village held a wake after preparing the body for burial during which the members of the village shared stories about Estina that could evoke laughter or tears. This type of wake allows for the complexity of feelings that accompany death, both joy at remembering the dead and sadness over losing them. In *Culture and Customs of Haiti*, J. Michael Dash explains the symbolism of these rituals: "The most important aspect of the funeral and burial is the need to disorient the dead and prevent them from returning to haunt the living. The perpetual threat of the dead person's return preoccupies family members during the period of mourning" (70). Although the characters whom Dany interacts with at the funeral do not seem preoccupied with the dead person returning, characters in other stories within the novel (like Anne) are haunted by the figurative returning of the dead when these funeral rituals are not performed. With the close connection of mourning death and overcoming trauma, the necessity of these elements in mourning suggest that overcoming trauma also has significant elements that cannot be overlooked.

The result of missing important elements in the process of mourning can especially be seen in the story of Anne because she is haunted by the death of her younger brother. This haunting comes both from being unable to put her brother's death to rest and from being unable to overcome the trauma of the situation that caused his death. Anne's younger brother drowned in the ocean when she was responsible for watching him, making his death particularly traumatic for her. If we consider her trauma in terms of the three stages of death, it seems that she cannot overcome her trauma because she is unable to fully mourn her brother's death without the symbolic and peaceful acts that are performed in the funeral rituals, as demonstrated in Dany's mourning of his aunt Estina. We see the remnants of Anne's trauma and the burden she carries in her haunted imagination of her younger brother's search for his grave: "She'd convinced herself that her brother was walking the earth looking for his grave. Whenever she went by a cemetery, any cemetery, she imagined him there, his tiny wet body bent over the tombstones, his ash-colored eyes surveying the

letters, trying to find his name” (Danticat 71). This passage shows not only the trauma Anne has faced because of her sense of responsibility in her brother’s death, but also the significance of being able to literally put her brother’s body to rest in order to let go of the emotional pain of his death. The lack of closure in this situation has left Anne with “a hollow grief extended over all these years, a penance procession that has yet to end” (238). The trauma of this experience haunts Anne, leaving her unable to peacefully move forward with her life. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra explains how a person becomes unable to move past a traumatic life experience: “One is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop” (21). Anne’s situation reflects LaCapra’s explanation as she continually relives the experience of her brother’s death and is haunted by the idea of him wandering the earth in search of his grave. Since Anne can never go back and perform these ceremonies putting him to rest, her situation brings up the important question of whether Anne will ever be able to overcome her trauma.

The literal stages of death and mourning as explained by Freda’s three stages of death seem to preclude characters from healing who, like Anne, will never have the opportunity to put the bodies of those they lost to rest. However, if these characters who cannot put their loved ones to rest can instead mourn these deaths in the sense of overcoming their trauma, they may still be able to heal from their trauma and let their loved ones go. Characters who have suffered trauma, whether or not this trauma includes death, must experience the stages of the trauma dying before they can fully heal. These stages of overcoming trauma correspond with the stages of death: the breath leaves the body as the trauma is verbally shared, the body is placed in the earth as the victims take action to leave the trauma behind, and the trauma is forgotten as the victims move forward in life without the constant influence of the trauma weighing them down.

Voicing the pain of trauma can symbolically be represented by the “breath leaving the body” stage of death. Just as the breath leaves the body in death, the breath leaves the body in the act of speaking the trauma. Although characters struggle to express traumatic events, this stage opens the door to recovery. Judith L. Herman explains the well-recognized necessity of expressing trauma when she writes, “Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for healing

of individual victims. . . . When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery” (1). Before victims can begin healing, they must “tell” the trauma. Herman offers verbal narrative as a prevention to or reduction of the haunting grief and trauma that many of the characters in the novel face.

In addition to verbal narration, Herman explains that “the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. . . . Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133). Not only must victims voice the trauma, but it also seems necessary for the victims to share their trauma with others as they put words to it. In this way, they let go of the trauma as they place trust in those they share it with. In a supportive social context, the three women in “The Funeral Singer” share with each other the narratives of their lives, including their traumatic departures from Haiti. Freda initiates this storytelling: “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” (Danticat 170). Freda not only places trust in the act of sharing to relieve individual stress at the moment, but she also describes a contradictory phenomenon in which the characters collectively have fewer sorrows as they share their problems, rather than being more weighed down as they receive each other’s stories. As their breath physically leaves their body, the trauma also begins to dissipate. The experience of sharing their stories exemplifies both the need for recovery to occur within the context of relationships and the healing that comes from sharing the truth. The practice of sharing their trauma helps the three women begin healing by giving them a support system of others who can empathize with the struggles they face, which teaches them that they are not alone.

Another example of voicing the trauma is the confession of the perpetrator, the dew breaker himself. Even the perpetrator experiences trauma, which Aitor Armendariz explains, “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” (41). We see the suffering of the perpetrator in the humanizing of the dew breaker in the novel. The dew breaker, who is Ka’s father, suffers from frequent nightmares which he tells Ka consist “of what I, . . . your father, did to others” (Danticat 23). In preparation to finally tell Ka the truth of his former life, Ka’s father throws the statue she made of him into the lake. This acts as a symbol of his first step in truth telling because he will no longer live what he feels is

the lie represented by the sculpture depicting him as a victim. Danticat writes that Ka's father "looks like a much younger man and appears calm and rested" (13) after throwing the sculpture into the lake, signifying the beginnings of the relief of sharing his trauma. As Ka's father tells her about his former life, "each word is now hard-won as it leaves [her] father's mouth, balanced like those hearts on the Ancient Egyptian scales" (21). This comparison to the Egyptian scales shows that not only must Ka's father lighten his heart in the afterlife to enter into the next life, so that his heart is not weighed down by guilt, but he also must lighten his heart by finding peace from his own guilt and grief on this earth to heal from his own trauma. However, even after her father's confession, Ka still believes that "confessions do not lighten living hearts" (33), suggesting that healing and finding peace require more than simply voicing the traumatic event.

After voicing the trauma, the second stage of death in which the body is "put back in the earth" represents taking action in overcoming the trauma. As Ka states, simply confessing or voicing the trauma is not enough to "lighten living hearts" (Danticat 33). Putting the body back in the earth represents someone taking action to put a body to rest through burial. The stories in *The Dew Breaker* suggest that in order for healing to continue after voicing the trauma, the characters must take action and personally shape their own lives and healing. In "The Funeral Singer," after Freda, Mariselle, and Rezia have shared their stories with one another, we see that Freda takes action to enter into the next stage of her life by committing to return to Haiti to fight in a militia. In this decision, Freda shows that she will fight the source of her trauma and by doing so will no longer remain a victim to the forces that maimed and killed her father (Danticat 180). Her decision represents taking action to leave the trauma behind, a step that could not happen until she had initiated the healing process by voicing the trauma and sharing her experiences. Unlike the action of burying a body in the earth, taking action to overcome trauma requires just the opposite: making the choice, like Freda, to no longer hide from the trauma of the past but to take action to fight against it.

Looking forward to the future rather than living in the past signifies another way of taking action to heal from trauma. In the story of "The Bridal Seamstress," Beatrice takes action in a way that looks like simply an escape from the haunting memory of her past, rather than a positive action toward the future. However, the decisive moment of change occurs when she retires from her job as a seamstress so that she can move away from the dew breaker's

detection. Beatrice's entire life has been haunted and defined by the traumatic torture she underwent. Beatrice often moves homes because wherever she goes, she believes her torturer ends up living on her street. She explains, "I let all my girls know when I move, in case they want to bring other girls to me. That's how he finds me. It must be. But now I'm not going to send these notes out anymore. I'm not going to make any more dresses. The next time I move, he won't find out where I am" (Danticat 137). Beatrice's acute memory of her torturer and her imagination that he always follows her, even in America, pervades Beatrice's consciousness and defines her life narrative, such as her retirement and her many changes of residence. Previously she had moved several times in an effort to avoid the dew breaker, but kept sending out cards and continued her same life in a different location. In this final move, however, she changes not only her residence but also her life narrative. Perhaps Beatrice's declaration that "the next time I move, he won't find out where I am" (137) is not so much a hope that he will not physically end up on her street, but rather the hope that as she takes this active control of defining the terms of her own life she will be able to finally leave behind the dew breaker and the scars he left her with. By leaving him behind in her thoughts she will no longer have to face the haunting reminder of him in her life.

The third stage of death, or "the one that will erase us completely and no one will remember us at all," corresponds to the stage of no longer being influenced by the memory of the trauma. It cannot be expected that a survivor could ever forget traumatic life experiences, but that they can perhaps live a life free from the oppression of those memories. An anonymous woman in the novel who was interviewed about her experiences as a prisoner in Casernes carries a permanent memory of her torturer, and this constant memory signifies the difficulty of forgetting such horrible trauma. We read, "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 198). Although she has forgotten her visual memory of him, her torturer is ever present. This example implies that the dew breaker will live forever in the "nightmares" of those around him despite their desire to forget him.

Like his victims, the dew breaker also desires to be forgotten in the memories of those he tortured and to forget his own hand in those traumatic events. In the conflict with the sculpture, Ka's father shows her his desire to be forgotten. He tells her, "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" (Danticat 20). In comparing

himself to the Egyptian statues that he has come to love, Ka's father believes that a statue that is not whole would better represent him. Ka makes a further connection to her father's knowledge of the Egyptians when she realizes that her father threw the sculpture into the lake because of his desire to be forgotten. Ka explains, "He has never wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in any way. He taught himself to appreciate the enormous weight of permanent markers by learning about the Ancient Egyptians. He had gotten to know them, through their crypts and monuments, in a way that he wanted no one to know him" (34). Although Ka's father admitted that he originally wanted to be buried with the sculpture, Ka now understands that her father feels that being buried with the sculpture would permanently document him, along with all the pain he represents for others. After he dies, the sculpture would be a lasting reminder of the horrors he caused that could never be forgotten.

While the sculpture would prevent the dew breaker from being forgotten, the physical scar on his face given to him by his last prisoner was meant to prevent him from ever forgetting his own trauma. The preacher who gave the dew breaker the scar explains, "Every time [the dew breaker] looked in the mirror, he would have to confront this mark and remember [the preacher]. 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" (227–28). While it gives the victim a sense of vindication to make the dew breaker forever remember both his victim and his guilt, this constant memory is problematic. Not only can the dew breaker never forget the trauma he caused others, but because of his remembering, those who have died cannot die the third and final death of being forgotten and thus be released peacefully into their afterlife. From this problem arises the question of the fate of all those who have suffered and cannot be forgotten. It seems that the dead who are still remembered must wait until they are no longer remembered to enter the peace of the final death, suggesting that the lasting memory of the scar and the statue will prevent numerous people from ever truly healing from the trauma.

Despite the hope provided by the model of the three deaths, the book ends with a lingering question. Anne, who is perhaps the most devout of the characters in the novel, calls the idea of atonement "a now useless cliché" when she offers the hope that "atonement, reparation, was possible and available for everyone" (Danticat 242). Her doubt suggests that the hope offered in the atonement is no longer possible, or that the wounds are too deep for an over-used solution to heal. Believing in the possibility of an atonement for all would

offer not only a forgiving view of the crimes committed, but also offer hope that in the atonement of the perpetrators (and thus the relief from guilt and memory) is the freedom of the victims from the memory of their trauma. Anne's language casts doubt on the ability of both the perpetrators and the victims to ever heal. In contrast, LaCapra writes, "Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation" (42). Those suffering trauma may never fully transcend their pain in the sense of completely forgetting the experience, but LaCapra offers hope by suggesting that the victims can counteract the negative effects of the trauma in their lives even if they can never forget the terrible event. This signifies that victims can live a full life unhindered by the memory of the trauma as they take action to counteract their painful memories.

Although none of the characters have reached the third stage of forgetting—in dying, in mourning those who have died, and in healing from trauma—by proposing this third stage of death in the story "The Funeral Singer," Danticat's novel suggests that this third stage of no longer remembering is possible after the characters have voiced their trauma and taken action to move forward. However, because the characters of the novel are interconnected in their memory of the trauma, none can forget while the others remember. Despite this hopelessness of ever forgetting and healing under the weight of the collective memory of society, the book ultimately offers the reassurance that "some wounds could heal, that some decisions would not haunt [them] forever" (Danticat 63). In the collective memory of the trauma, the characters have a hope of collectively healing and forgetting as they each take steps to heal from the horrors they have suffered.

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