

**POSTCOLONIAL
TRAUMA THEORY AND
THE SHORT STORY
CYCLE: EDWIDGE
DANTICAT'S *THE DEW
BREAKER***

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Abstract

Starting from the symbolic presence of a scar in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, which illustrates the tensions between wounds and healing, fragmentation and connection prevalent in the text, this article argues for a careful and contextualized look at narrative form in order to obtain a new, more complete view of the meanings in the text, including its political vindications. I offer a detailed definition of the short story cycle as a peculiar case of the simultaneity of closure and openness, both formally and in terms of meaning, which is aimed at making a contribution to the critical debates on this hybrid genre. When looking at both the sequential and independent readings of the text, the short story cycle proves most suitable to represent the complexity of the Haitian diaspora, and it also offers an interesting and necessary revision of trauma theory from the perspective of postcolonial studies.

Keywords: Postcolonial trauma theory, short story cycle, diaspora, Haitian-American literature, Edwidge Danticat.

Resumen

Partiendo de la presencia simbólica de una cicatriz en *The Dew Breaker*, de Edwidge Danticat, que ilustra las tensiones entre las heridas y la curación, la fragmentación y la conexión que prevalecen en el texto, este artículo aboga por una mirada cuidadosa y contextualizada a la forma narrativa con el fin de obtener una visión nueva y más completa de los significados presentes en el texto, incluidas sus reivindicaciones políticas. Se ofrece una definición detallada del ciclo de relatos como un caso peculiar de la simultaneidad de cierres y aperturas, tanto a nivel formal como de contenido, que tiene como objetivo contribuir a los debates críticos sobre este género híbrido. Al atender a las lecturas secuenciales e independientes del texto, se demuestra la adecuación del ciclo de relatos para representar la diáspora haitiana, y se ofrece además una revisión interesante y necesaria de la teoría de trauma desde el punto de vista de los estudios postcoloniales.

Palabras clave: Teoría postcolonial de trauma; ciclo de relatos; diáspora; literatura haitiana-americana; Edwidge Danticat.

This article begins with a scar on a black man's face.¹ The scar is ropelike and it "runs from [his] right cheek down to the corner of his mouth" (Danticat 2004: 2). The man is a torturer, a murderer, a rapist, and also a father, a husband, a barber, a Catholic, and an admirer of ancient Egyptian culture. He is Mr. Bienaimé, also known as the Dew Breaker, the eponymous character of Haitian American Edwidge Danticat's 2004 text. Dew breakers—a euphemistic Haitian Kreyol term for torturers (Rohrleitner 2011:78)—were members of the Tonton Macoutes, volunteer militiamen during the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti (1957-1986), who would "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" (Danticat 2004:112).² The Dew Breaker is here characterized in terms of inbetweenness, acting on the border between day and night, invading his victims' safe shelter with his cruel torturing mission, and the drama associated to this figure is reinforced by the dew breaking image, with its resonances of violence and fragility uneasily combined, and this characterization is reinforced by the scar on the Dew Breaker's face. A scar is a visible reminder of a wound of some kind which simultaneously provides, through imperfect connection, proof of an attempt to recover wholeness, of some degree of healing, and it may refer to a mark on either a person's body or mind. This particular scar originates in a terrible moment of violence, and it is related to two apparently opposed but ultimately complementary events: the wound before the scar was inflicted on the Dew Breaker by a Haitian Baptist minister, who happened to be the last man he tortured and killed; the healing of the wound was completed by the unwitting minister's stepsister Anne, who would later become the Dew Breaker's wife and the mother of his daughter Ka. Although the Dew Breaker stopped hurting people when he left Haiti and settled in the United States, his scar proves the aliveness of the past in the present, haunting him as his memory haunts his many victims, some of whose voices are also heard in this text. This scar is therefore related to both violent death and new life, and like the imperfect union of flesh, the relationship between the Dew Breaker and his wife—and ultimately, between all the characters and stories in the text—shows a fragile connection accompanied by silences and gaps, by hidden memories and failed attempts at forgetting a terrible past. In its evocation of fragmentation and connection, wounding and healing, forgetting and remembrance, the scar on this man's face becomes an essential image

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² The Milice the Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale, the official name of the Tonton Macoutes, was a paramilitary militia recruited and instituted by François Duvalier in 1959, and his son Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc") continued to use it as his own personal army and revenge unit from 1971 when his father died until his exile to France in 1986 (Rohrleitner 2011:75, 84).

to illustrate the basic forces around which *The Dew Breaker* is constructed, both in terms of content and form: on the one hand, it evokes the particular traumatic experience of the victims of violence in Haiti as well as their ongoing search for healing; on the other, it becomes a powerful self-reflective indicator of the storytelling and story interpreting processes that Danticat is offering her readers, reinforcing the generic conventions of the specific form she chooses in order to articulate her text: the short story cycle.

Danticat's fiction in general, and *The Dew Breaker* in particular, need to be located in the history of Haiti and Danticat's own personal history, both full of wounding events and suffering. She was born in 1969 under François Duvalier ("Papa Doc")'s dictatorship (1957-1971), and her parents left her in Haiti at a very early age to be raised by relatives. When she was twelve her parents, who by then had two more children, brought Edwidge and her brother to New York with them, but she explains how challenging it was to become a family again and how her fear of abandonment and her parents' absence have always haunted her. The 1980s were a particularly hard time for Haitians in America, who were branded as refugees and associated to AIDS, and together with racial discrimination, Danticat also experienced the death of several relatives and friends because of violence, fear, sickness or ocean crossing.³ Haiti has had a tragic history of invasion and occupation, military dictatorships, political coups, trade embargoes and also natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes, and, as one critic has stated, "[t]here are few places around the world where the memories of a traumatic past are so present in the everyday life of the population as in Haiti" (Ibarrola 2011:3). It is therefore not surprising to hear Danticat admit her fascination with history and "especially the way that it manifests itself in the present" as well as with "the gaps in history" (Mirabal 2007:35). On the other hand, the relevance of the Haitian diaspora, which encompasses many generations and probably includes as many people as those who still live in Haiti, poses a series of challenges, as Danticat also admits, most notably the need for a redefinition of what it means to be Haitian in the contemporary context (Mirabal 2007:29). All in all, and although Danticat prefers to account for trauma from a resilient perspective, attesting to some degree of healing in spite of overwhelming suffering, she also admits being attracted to conflict,⁴ and her writing persistently voices grief, terror, torture and sadness, thus reflecting both personal and collective scars.

³ Danticat has spoken about these experiences on various occasions; see for example Jaggi (2004), her interview with Racine-Toussaint (2004) or Lyons (2003), and her book *Create Dangerously* (2011).

⁴ See, for example, her interview with Marlene Racine-Toussaint.

Such wounds have been the focus of analysis of a good number of critics and as a whole, “Danticat’s writings have been persistently discussed as trauma fiction” (Collins 2011:6).⁵ In particular, *The Dew Breaker*, which unveils the psychological wounds and scars of the victims of trauma in Haiti (Ibarrola 2010:23), has been considered a “casebook” in trauma theory because it brings to the fore critical concerns of the discipline such as “how to deal with atrocities; how to respond ethically to them; the problems of forgetting or forgiving; what kind of accounts outlive the victims and witnesses; and how to move from individual voices to collective consciousness” (Ibarrola 2011:14). Critics generally characterize trauma fiction “not only in terms of its content but also through fragmented form, where temporal and narrative disjuncture and repetition reinscribe the traumatic crisis” (Collins 2011:7). Therefore, alongside the content of traumatic experience, justification for the trauma approach to this particular text is found in its structural and thematic fragmentation, in the chronological disjunctions that “signal the repetition of traumatic brutality, in different forms, throughout Haitian history” (Collins 2011:9), in the “gaps, lacunae and traumatic black holes that prevail in the individual and collective memories of her characters” (Ibarrola 2011:6). Alongside the emphasis on fragmentation and dislocation, many of these readings of *The Dew Breaker* also allow for positive resolutions, as they look into the community attempts “to heal through telling its own story” (Smith 2007:139), the way the text offers a possibility to find “some room for hope and recovery” (Ibarrola 2010:23), and the storytelling process as an invaluable “opportunity to reach a safe post-traumatic condition” (2011:6):

Danticat’s characters mediate the tensions between the trauma of an oppressive past characterized by death, repression, dictatorship, and the hope for new beginnings in the diasporic location despite their marginalization as disfavored immigrants. Consequently, Danticat’s narratives reveal the complicated trajectories of the human struggle against adversity, the resilience of the spirit, the

⁵ Collins also mentions that this framework is not used unanimously (2011:14-15), but it is certainly predominant. Some illustrative examples of the ways in which Danticat’s writings have been read as trauma fiction include the analyses of sexual violence and inherited trauma in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) (Ibarrola (2011); Smith (2007); Sweeney (2007)); the views of the traumatic experience of Haitians and their search for community through storytelling in *Krik? Krak* (1996) (Davis (2001); Ibarrola (2011)); the revision of the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937 in *The Farming of Bones* (1998) (Caruso (2010); Harbawi (2007); Ibarrola (2011); Rohrleitner (2011); Vega-González (2004)); the acts of memory as a response to traumatic experience as made manifest on the diasporic space and the female body in “Reading Lessons” (Martínez Falquina 2013); and the denounce of the traumatic death of Danticat’s uncle in Krome detention center in *Brother, I’m Dying* (2008) (Caruso (2010); Waller (2009)). Although it is too soon to see the trends in criticism around Danticat’s latest short story cycle, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), reviews are following the same trends, emphasizing the lost mothers, lost children, accidental deaths, murder and exile in the narrative (Kakutani (2013); Sontag (2013)).

power of remembering, and the need to reconcile with the past as a primary step to imagine a better future. (Mehta 2009: 63)

In this brief review of previous criticism on Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, which includes an attention to formal fragmentation as well as a yearning to find healing and hope in the reading, we observe a sample of what critics have qualified as the trauma theory contradiction (Luckhurst 2008:82; Visser 2011:274), that becomes unavoidable when approaching trauma in a postcolonial text. This contradiction derives from two contrasting views of trauma: on the one hand, the trend that considers trauma an inaccessible and unspeakable experience, characterized by Cathy Caruth and Geoffrey Hartman, and which remains the dominant model in cultural trauma studies; and on the other, the counterpart in trauma theory associated with the work of Judith Herman, who argues "that narrative is a powerful and empowering therapeutic tool, enabling integration of the traumatic experience and aiding healing and recovery" (Visser 2011:274). This leaves us with two contradicting views of the trauma narrative, the former considering it "aporetic, leading to increased indeterminacy and impossibility," the second seeing it as "therapeutic, enabling a 'working through' and eventual resolution of trauma" (274).

Trauma theory, which has made an outstanding impact on literary studies in the past two decades and "is now regarded as one of today's signal cultural paradigms" (Visser 2011:270), has nonetheless recently been the focus of critical controversy. Kansteiner and Weilnböck, who consider the concept of cultural trauma, which has been elevated to the status of a new master narrative, "strangely narrow and aestheticized" (2010:229), outspokenly criticize deconstructive trauma studies' "disdain for narrative" in spite of the demonstrated healing effects of narrative to come to terms with the effects of violence (233). But the most heated debates on the adequacy of trauma theory come from the field of postcolonial literary criticism, for the possibility of it being of value to interpret non-western literatures is still being questioned.⁶ Although trauma may be a legitimate category in the field of psychiatry, argues Michela Borzaga (2012:74), it is problematic to work with Western psychiatric and cultural theories of traumas in a postcolonial situation (65), to such an extent that in its current mainstream use, "'trauma' becomes more of a *barrier* than a fruitful epistemological tool" (68).⁷ The most

⁶ As Stef Craps argues in some detail in "Pioneering postcolonial trauma theory," a section of her book *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2012:28-31), Frantz Fanon already anticipated "the criticisms of the individualizing, pathologizing, and depoliticizing tendencies of the dominant trauma model" (28) that are still on the critical scene today.

⁷ Borzaga also vindicates the trauma theories coming from the postcolony, with examples like Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe or Ashis Nandy, as she denounces the reluctance on the part of scholars "to consider their works as fundamental contributions to trauma studies," which she considers part of the censoring mechanisms inherent in trauma discourse (2012:80). This is also

commonly denounced feature of trauma theory is its Eurocentrism and its persisting lack of attention to context, best exemplified in the way PTSD has often been brought to the developing world “without any great thought of the great cultural, social, and other difficulties there would be with that move” (Bracken, in Van Nuys 2010). Hence, trauma theory’s lack of historical particularity clashes with the postcolonial insisting focus on historical, political, social and economic factors, as well as the claims to attend to specific postcolonial experiences, which include the trauma of racist oppression, or the vindication of belief systems that are obscured and undermined when a Western theory is imposed onto the non-Western world. Eurocentrism is also made manifest in the generalized idea that trauma experience can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies like fragmentation or non-linearity, resulting in an imposition of Western formal criteria of narrative rupture and aporia and deriving in a prescriptive and narrow trauma canon (Visser 2011:277; Craps 2012:38-43). Recently it is becoming more common to assume that:

[r]ather than positing a necessary relation between aesthetic form and political or ethical effectiveness, trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate. (Craps 2012:43)

In accordance with the latter view, postcolonial writers and critics resist the prescriptive trauma paradigm, vindicating the presence of narrative features such as non-linearity and disruptive causality in oral narratives of the indigenous cultural traditions (Visser 2011:278), and activating indigenous knowledge systems and perceptions of the world” (Borzaga 2012:71), such as specific ways of understanding time as non-linear or not centered on cause-effect relations. This is particularly relevant to understand the literary articulation of trauma, for if the past, present, and future are envisaged as “a unified tangle,” as it is done in many parts of the postcolonial world, “the repetition and re-living of traumatic experiences as well as the potential for overcoming trauma: i.e. the process of working through it, are not separate and set at the two ends of the spectrum but coexist and struggle with one another in complex and unexpected ways” (Borzaga 2012:78). In addition, we find a resistance to a further Western imposition, “its individualistic conceptualization of man and society” (Borzaga 2012:70), challenged by emphasizing the “healing resources of family and community” (Konner 2007:320), and the view that trauma is simply not healed in isolation (Bracken, in Van Nuys 2010). A further element of mainstream trauma theory that several authors challenge is the habit of reading trauma stories emphasizing the post-traumatic

symptomatic of what Stef Craps qualifies as “trauma theory’s general blindness to, or lack of interest in, the traumas visited upon members of non-Western cultures” (2012:11-12).

condition, solely as shattering experience, destitution, personal loss, and ignoring instances of strength, resilience and recovery: “The tale of trauma in the West has unfortunately been told as disorder, return or stasis, hardly as growth, change or renewal” (Borzaga 2012:88). It is a proven fact that “resilience and/or independent recovery are by far the most common responses to potentially traumatic experiences”; however, “studies of resilience are far less common than studies of PTSD itself” (Konner 2007:320).⁸ Because emphasis on the post-traumatic condition may lead to maintaining it, emphasizing debilitating effects instead of recovery or resilience, postcolonial thought and literatures adopt a more affirmative politics, emphasizing agency, empowerment, forward-looking narratives, or what Borzaga calls “post-traumatic growth” (2012:74).

It seems obvious, then that the second approach to trauma, which considered narrative an empowering possibility in the healing, is more appropriate for the articulation of a postcolonial trauma theory for, as opposed to Caruth’s “homogenizing and dehistoricizing tendencies,” it allows for “a historically and culturally specific approach to trauma narratives,” history being a crucial aspect in postcolonial thought (Visser 2011:274). But the resilience-focused, sometimes celebratory vision is not free of criticism either. In her analysis of *The Dew Breaker*, Jo Collins considers whether “an approach which sees literature as a vehicle for healing can fully recognize the political concerns of postcolonial writings such as Danticat’s” (2011:6). She concludes that what she calls the “cathartic” paradigm—“a strand of trauma theory which asserts the cathartic role of literature as testimony,” and where the reader is ethically called on to engage with the text, becoming the interpreter of testimony (6)—has limitations for postcolonial theory, the most relevant of which being the potential silencing of the political realities depicted in the text and the risk of appropriation of the trauma of others, what Spivak calls “epistemic violence.” In spite of the exoticization of Danticat’s writing by many critics, and some others’ having found a possibility to empathize with the perpetrator in *The Dew Breaker*, the way her text is full of fragmentation, dissociation, negation, and reflexive self-questioning makes it obvious for Collins that Danticat is trying to offer an approach to trauma that resists any attempts at appropriating it as a whole and therefore misrepresenting it (2011:11). This is aimed at not allowing readers—especially Americans, who are complicit in their country’s neo-colonial relationship to Haiti—to have their guilt appeased and find “some disavowed salvation” in the narrative (13). As Stef Craps has warned, it is important for a text to unsettle “triumphalist accounts of the postcolonial that deny the

⁸ As well as vindicating resilience as fact, that is, as something that is there but that trauma theory does not always allow itself to see, avoiding victimhood has always been an important motivation in postcolonial literatures, that recognize that “[p]utting pain at the heart of demands for political recognition severely limits the possibilities for political transformation” (Craps 2012:126).

continuing effects of racial and colonial trauma” (2012:71), for the traumatic condition goes on and there is a danger in celebratory readings of these narratives of neo-colonial appropriation and silencing.

As this paper is set to prove, *The Dew Breaker* does not fit comfortably in either the aporetic or the therapeutic trauma paradigms, although it shows traces of both, and it is my contention that by examining the text’s resistance to being fixed according to either set of assumptions, the careful reader receives an illuminating vision on both approaches that can contribute to the current debates on postcolonial trauma theory. Therefore, as I argue in this paper, it is important to read the text on its own terms, carefully examining its narrative strategies while attending to the context- and cultural-specific features it incorporates. When doing so, it becomes immediately obvious that more depth in the study of the text’s generic nature is required. Most critics so far have referred to *The Dew Breaker* simply as a novel, and its sections as “chapters.”⁹ For others, the text is a “collection of short stories” (Eder 2004; Ibarrola 2010), “a book of interlinked short stories” (Carter 2004); “a collection of interconnected stories of Haitian immigrants” (Walcott-Hackshaw 2008:73); “a series of vignettes organized as a constellation of stories” (Mehta 2009:67); “a suite of pieces that falls somewhere between a novel and a short story collection” (Patterson 2004); “a novel-in-stories” (Rohrleitner 2011:79); or a “composite novel” (Ibarrola 2011).¹⁰ Irrespective of the name used to define *The Dew Breaker*’s genre, a good number of the critics recognize the relative independence of the stories,¹¹ mentioning elisions, discontinuity, disjointedness, the text’s loose and fragmented form, and referring to the “jaggedness of the structure” (Hong 2004), the “haphazard assemblage” (Charles 2004), the seamless “organic performance” and “looping structure of overlapping stories” (Kakutani 2004), or the

⁹ See Charles, Collins, Hong, Kakutani (2004), Maristed, Marshall, Mehta, Rohrleitner, Rose, Smith, Vega González (2007), or Walcott-Hackshaw. We also find a peculiar case in which authors first define *The Dew Breaker* as a book of short stories and then at some point introduce the word “novel” or “chapters.” This is the case, for example, with Ibarrola (2010:44) or Walcott-Hackshaw (2008:79) and points at the desire for unity, the habit of looking at a volume like this as a novel.

¹⁰ The critic that refers to the text’s structure in more detail is Aitor Ibarrola in “Secret Links in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*,” where he uses the term “composite novel,” developed by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris in 1995. However, he does not attempt a definition of the genre, referring to J. Gerald Kennedy’s 1995 words about the text lacking a precise definition (Ibarrola 2011:214), and he centers on the search for cohesiveness and wholeness in spite of structural fragmentation, arguing that the text asks for the “collaboration of the reader in the reconstruction of that coherent whole that underlies the text” (217). On the other hand, although Bellamy uses the term “short story cycle,” she does not develop it either.

¹¹ Charles, Maristed, and Ibarrola (2011) have pointed out the fact that some stories have been published separately.

“immense lacunae that loom in and between them” (Ibarrola 2011:22). In spite of these references to fragmentation and disconnection, the generalized critical emphasis is placed on the Dew Breaker character as the center of the book, which becomes a “mosaic” (Mehta 2009:67) or a “puzzle” of his identity (Walcott-Hackshaw 2008:79), each story being as much about him as a perpetrator as about each of his victims’ own wounds, and in such a reading, logically, the final story, told partly from the Dew Breaker’s point of view, finally provides the desired satisfaction of wholeness. The main motivation, therefore, seems to be the search for unity and connection, and despite the fact that “some stories are frustratingly hard to place” (Charles 2004), in spite of the text’s resistance to being fully tamed (Ibarrola 2011:6-7), the reader needs to “fit the pieces together” (Rose 2004), and is encouraged “to keep up the effort” to “pull every strand together and piece an identity out of scraps” (Maristed 2004). The reward will be to observe “the priority of communal over individual forms of storytelling” (Rohrleitner 2011:79), the degree of continuity and cohesion” that Danticat finally manages to provide in spite of the text’s “broken fragments of memory and experience” (Ibarrola 2011:24), and which uncovers her ultimate reluctance “to mark a clear division between victimizer and victimized, since all of them seem to be burdened by a history in which they have been pawns of forces they could not really control” (Ibarrola 2010:54). All in all, critics generally refer to the text as resting “somewhere between a novel and a short story collection” (Collins 2011:9), but that *somewhere* is too vague and needs to be clarified in a formal study that will contribute to enhance the meanings offered in the text. In fact, *The Dew Breaker* is a clear case of a short story cycle, and in that respect it functions, as the scar does, as a sign of connection and disconnection.

Research on the short story cycle—also known as *short story sequence* or *composite novel*—was inaugurated in 1971 by Forrest Ingram, who defined it as “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (1971:19). This definition has been revised, completed, and applied to a number of texts by critics such as Gerald Kennedy, Susan Garland Mann, Robert Luscher, Maggie Dunn & Ann Morris, or Rolf Lundén, among many others.¹² In spite of the critical attention that the short story cycle has received in the last thirty years, the need to study and vindicate it as a separate, worthy genre persists. Critics insist on the need to find an adequate term to affirm its differential presence and identity, which has resulted in a significant terminological confusion.¹³ As regards its formal features, there is still a

¹² See also the relevant analyses by Davis, Hadju, Kelley, Martín Lucas, Nagel or Wong.

¹³ Besides the most commonly used names, “cycle,” “sequence,” or “composite,” Lundén lists those which emphasize the connections with the novel (*story-novel*, *storied novel*, *composite novel*, *fragmentary novel*, *episodic novel*, *anthology novel*, *collective novel*, *para-novel*, *rovelle*), those which remark the affinity with the independent story collections (*unified short story*

certain imbalance in the privileging of unity, coherence and closure to the detriment of fragmentation, discontinuity and openness, which often results in the subordination of the cycle to the story and in the lack of credibility of the arguments for an independent genre. As for the thematic implications of the genre, some critics have considered it a typically American genre (Kennedy 1995; Lundén 1999), whereas others take it as a genre which is typically feminine (Kelley 1995), typically ethnic (Davis 2001; Nagel 2001), typically Native American (Wong 1995), or even typically universal (Hajdu 2003). Besides the fact that a univocal association of a literary form with a specific theme may lead to undesirable essentializations, the attempt to relate this genre to a specific kind of identity has contributed to the problems of definition of the short story cycle. All in all, more specificity and depth are still needed in order to reach an adequate definition and valuation of this genre, which is why I am proposing a working definition which will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the genre, as it shows how new meanings are opened by the reading of a text like *The Dew Breaker* as a short story cycle.

Assuming that literary genres are reading/writing strategies that need to be contextualized, and that differences between one genre and another are more a question of degree than of nature, I argue that the most appropriate definition of the short story cycle is that it is a peculiar case of the simultaneity of closure and openness, both formally and in terms of meaning. In the process of reading a short story cycle, each closure is followed by new openings, which makes it necessarily provisional. The full text is therefore characterized by the openness given by this provisionality of any impulse towards closure. On the other hand, the textual openness of the short story cycle is founded on a series of closures organized as cycle stories, that is, the minor textual units—and by minor I mean shorter with respect to the whole—are precisely characterized by the closeness of closure. This definition can be interpreted both in a linear manner—as a sequencing of the closure-openness pattern until the awareness of the open closure at the end—and in a cyclic way—as a continuous recurrence of the closure-openness pattern. Moreover, the short story cycle in its centripetal and centrifugal impulses may be useful to account for the contemporary world, but it cannot be univocally associated to one specific identity. In fact, its definition as simultaneous openness and closure as well as its relation to the contemporary context prevail over determined contents or associations to gender, ethnic or national identity.

Besides the possibility of cycle stories to be published and read independently as short stories, the short story cycle constitutes the sum of two reading possibilities. On the one hand, the whole text can be read sequentially as we

collection, integrated short-story collection, short story collection), and other more ambiguous terms which refer to a formal blend or compound (like *blend, blended work, short story compound, short story ensemble* or *divided narrative*) (1999:12-18).

would read a novel. But the feature that makes it a different genre with respect to the novel is the fact that the cycle stories are at least relatively autonomous within the book as a whole, which implies the possibility to read each cycle story independently with some perception of closure. The simultaneity of both options is the key to support a definition of the short story cycle as a different, independent genre and its recognition is aimed at making the reader—who is already familiar with the strategies he or she applies to the reading of a novel or a short story—aware of the different doors that are opened by approaching a particular text as a short story cycle. As for my own choice of the short story cycle as an adequate term to refer to this genre, I do assume that it is necessary to assign a name to a reality we are trying to delimit, but without introducing a new word that will contribute to the long list already out there. The term *cycle* still seems to prevail in criticism, but even more importantly, it responds to a definition with a strong presence of circularity in its recurrence of the closure and openness impulses. Other existing terms currently in force, like *short story sequence* or *composite novel*, are useful to indicate one specific structural variation within the possibilities offered by story cycles in general, the former emphasizing sequential reading and an accumulation of meaning, the latter referring to a form which is directly related and also subordinated to the novel.

Because the sequential, holistic reading has been sufficiently detailed by different critics, it is worth devoting more attention to the other, not less interesting possibility of reading the cycle stories of *The Dew Breaker* as independent units. Each of the nine cycle stories has a title and shows some degree of unity in structure, narrator, character, setting, symbolism and theme. Setting shows significant diversity, with stories covering diverse moments between the 1960s and the present, in Florida, New York, rural and urban Haiti. The first cycle story, entitled “The Book of the Dead,” which I will use as an example, is set in New York in the present, and it starts with a disappearance: “My father is gone” (Danticat 2004: 1). The first person narrative voice is that of Ka Bienaimé, who defines herself as from Haiti although she has never been there, because, as she puts it, “it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents” (2), which already indicates her frustrated search for connection. She is “an artist, a sculptor,” or rather, in her own words, “an obsessive wood-carver with a single subject thus far—my father” (2). The dominant image in this text is that of the distancing gaps between Ka and her parents, which reflect a series of voids, silences and secrets that she has no words for, but which she tries to voice and fill in through her art. She has made a sculpture of her father the way she imagined him in prison, and she has used “a piece of mahogany that was naturally flawed, with a few superficial cracks along what was now the back. 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” (4). Her father comes back and confesses that he has thrown the sculpture in a lake because he, who never even wanted his picture taken, does not deserve a statue, since back in Haiti, he “was the hunter, he was not the

prey” (16), that he was never a prisoner but worked in a prison, torturing people, and that the man who cut his face was one of the many people he killed (17). Just like the statue is already lost, for “[t]he cracks have probably taken in so much water that the wood has split into several chunks and plunged to the bottom” (12), the gaps in Ka’s life will be filled with a painful story that she would rather not have known, and which will make Ka lose her artistic subject, “the prisoner father [she] loved as well as pitied” (25).

Ka’s life before her father shares his secret with her already reflects how the family were struggling with the immigrant experience. Language is one of several barriers between the daughter and her parents, who switch between English and Creole. It is true that some Haitians have succeeded in America, like actress Gabrielle Fonteneau, whom they are supposed to sell the sculpture to, but Ka’s mother, on the contrary, has confronted racism and exclusion at her work. Ka’s father’s love of Egyptians is explained as an attempt at coming to terms with the complicated history of Haiti—their having many gods, the fact that they fought among themselves and that they were often ruled by foreigners, the pharaohs like the dictators he had fled—, but he is especially attracted to this ancient culture because of “the way they mourn their dead” (Danticat 2004: 9), because “[t]hey know how to grieve” (9). In fact, he named his daughter Ka, an Egyptian word that refers to “a double of the body [...], the body’s companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead” (12-13). Reflecting Ka’s early obsession with absences and the untold, her father reminds her how when they used to go to the Brooklyn museum all she noticed in the statues “was how there were pieces missing from them, eyes, noses, legs, sometimes even heads”; her father tells her, “You always noticed more what was not there than what was. Of course,” Ka says, “this way of looking at things was why I ultimately began sculpting in the first place, to make statues that would amaze my father even more than these ancient relics” (15). The emphasis on gaps, absences and disconnection seems to be a note for the reader, who is most likely to try to fill them in as she did with her art, only to see this impulse frustrated in the end.

There is ultimately no healing in this cycle story, the filling in of all those gaps in Ka’s life does not result in wholeness, for “confessions do not lighten living hearts” (Danticat 2004:27). It is the transmission of Ka’s parents’ trauma that is emphasized, the telling of the story not alleviating her dislocation but actually representing a new traumatic experience for her.¹⁴ The story is far from finished, for

¹⁴ Bellamy interprets Ka as an example of post-memory, Marianne Hirsh’s term for transgenerational trauma, which she places in the Haitian context by focusing on the Marasa or twin motif, also introduced by Vega González (2007). Bellamy favors a sequential reading and offers a positive, almost celebratory resolution for the text as resistance and hope in relation to the resistance to binary oppositions like the hunter/prey dichotomy.

Ka will now have to confront the truth about her father and the responsibility, previously limited to her mother, of being the keeper of this terrible secret, becoming her father's "good angel," "his mask against his own face" (27). But the text also shows some closure in the way Ka is already rewriting the diasporic experience, trying to make sense of the past for the future: if she previously thought her parents' main problem was their exiled life in Brooklyn, she now understands that the unfamiliar, the distance with respect to Haiti, must have been "so comforting, rather than distressing" (27), dislocation not being necessarily negative after all. She also finally sees why her father used to read to her from "The Book of the Dead," and understands the true meaning of terrible lines like "My mouth is the keeper of both speech and silence. I am the child who travels the roads of yesterday, the one who has been wrought from his eye" (25). If read sequentially, the significance of this cycle story changes in focus from the daughter to the father, the Dew Breaker, providing a humane view of the torturer, a reference to his having a family, who also suffers because of what he did, and of course to his own guilt and pain. This reading is obviously there in the text, but it is by examining the cycle story independently that we give due attention to the also relevant experience of a second-generation immigrant who is struggling with the difficulty of coming to terms with her and her parents' past, and with the overwhelming and complicated presence of history in the present. The necessity to vindicate the gaps and absences as part of the process of self-definition challenges any attempt to take any simple conception of healing for granted.

This kind of attention can of course be brought onto each of the cycle stories, although unfortunately I cannot do justice to them here: "Seven" shows the problems of communication confronted by a married couple who were separated for seven years and are now reunited in New York, in a context of strong racism towards Haitians. In "Water Child," Nadine is an isolated, lonely woman who is incapable of properly mourning her aborted baby or communicating with either her parents in Haiti or the people around her in New York. In "The Book of Miracles," the wife of an ex-dew breaker lives in shame, guilt and fear, "her life a pendulum between forgiveness and regret" (Danticat 2004: 72), a dilemma to which she can only respond by resorting to a religious interpretation of events. "Night Talkers" is the story of a young man's return to rural Haiti to come to terms with his parents' violent death, which he will by being confronted with another perpetrator, by learning proper mourning and the importance of speaking out one's grief and nightmares. In "The Bridal Seamstress" a young journalist meets a woman who is haunted by memories of her torturer back in Haiti and finds a life purpose in writing about those people "whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives" (117). In "Monkey Tails," Michel is recording his past story of violence and absent fathers for his unborn son in order for him to know where he came from and have a myth for the future. "The Funeral Singer" deals with three immigrant women who become friends by doing their English language exercises together, by sharing

the stories of their traumatic past in Haiti—rape, a shot husband, a disappeared father—and singing and toasting “to the terrible days behind us and the uncertain ones ahead” (155). “The Dew Breaker” takes us back to Haiti in 1967 and it follows the last few hours of a priest who has called his flock to rebel and intends to be sacrificed for his country; his torturer and killer, who recalls how he became a Macoute and the way he used to torture his prisoners; and the minister’s stepsister, who saves the torturer from his life of violence and starts a new life in New York marked by the pain of hiding terrible secrets from their past.

The sequential reading of *The Dew Breaker*, which predominates amongst critics, takes each section as part of the same story and establishes direct and indirect connections between each cycle story’s protagonist(s) and their torturer, the Dew Breaker. By adding to the different episodes in which he was involved in his past in Haiti, we receive a progressive development of his character. On the other hand, by stressing belonging, bonding and the sharing of stories, this reading explores the process of construction of a community of Haitians now living in the United States who are united by their painful past in Haiti. Needless to say, this reading can be quite satisfactory in the way that an attentive, active reader is rewarded with the discovery of connections that are not necessarily obvious at first sight. While to say that there is redemption for the Dew Breaker in this reading may not be exactly appropriate, it is true that clarification, even some sense of healing and expiation is made possible by connecting this man’s violent acts to the situation of Haiti, and laying the blame on the context. The text therefore becomes a testimony of the traumatic experience of Haitians, an act of commemoration of all victims of the Duvalier regime, who become united by the sharing of scars of the body and mind. Danticat’s narrative thus functions as a surrogate mourning process in which the suffering of all, victims and perpetrators, is voiced and made visible. The emphasis on healing in this reading associates it to the therapeutic model of trauma criticism.

One problem of this reading of *The Dew Breaker* when taken as the only possibility is that often, in the yearning to find connections, gaps may be filled inaccurately. While it is true that many stories bear a relation to the Dew Breaker, it is not clear that all of them do so. In “The Bridal Seamstress,” for example, we meet a woman who was once tortured by a macoute, but there is no way of knowing whether it is the same one or not. Something similar happens with the attackers of Rézia, Mariselle’s husband or Freda’s father, accounted for in “The Funeral Singer.” In other cycle stories, the link to the supposed central character is not that relevant at all, as in “Seven,” where the only reference to the Dew Breaker consists of the fact that Eric lives in his basement; or even more so in “Water Child,” where we follow Eric’s girlfriend but nothing is mentioned about the Dew Breaker or macoutes. While I am not claiming that there are no relevant connections between the different stories, the text often sets limits to them, frustrating the search for connection in such a way that the story cannot be taken as a whole and appropriated. This reading

is mainly focused on the difficulty of narrative to account for traumatic reality. On the other hand, each of these cycle stories also makes perfect sense in an independent reading, and the focus with respect to the sequential reading thus changes from the recreation of community to the reinforcement of each individual memory, from the possibility of connection to the solitude of fragmentation. Whereas in a sequential reading we tend to concentrate on the construction of cause-effect relations, the autonomous reading of the cycle stories, not so aimed at making connections, opens up an interpretation of certain themes, ideas and characters as relevant per se, as symbolically autonomous and meaningful. It may be true that all these characters are carrying scars derived from the violent history of Haiti, but it is no less true that not all their scars are the same. *The Dew Breaker* presents us with victims and perpetrators, and sequential readings have all too often blurred the differences between them. In this complex context of contemporary USA, where we witness all of them living together—not only the Dew Breaker but Emmanuel Constant is in the neighborhood too¹⁵—and where Americans still need to seriously face their complicity in the violence that has invaded Haiti for decades, the independent reading of each story reminds us of how important it is to sustain and explore those distinctions.

The short story cycle generic choice is the most suitable to try to represent this complex and painful situation, largely because it is a kind of narrative that calls its own powers of representation into question, trying to account for the diasporic reality as it points at the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of doing so with a real sense of closure, of having said the last word. In order for all the meanings that the text offers to be unveiled, including the political vindications in it, a careful analysis of this form is therefore necessary. On the other hand, the coexistence of openness and closure does not allow for either the therapeutic or the aporetic models of trauma to be applied clearly, and the way in this short story cycle some elements of either become useful, whereas certain ones are challenged, demands a revision of both critical theories. As a conclusion, a postcolonial trauma theory, while it does not have to reject trauma theory altogether, does need to offer a thorough revision of its assumptions before it can be applied to a postcolonial text.

The short story cycle is the form that Danticat chose for her commemorative text in order for each and every voice participating in it to be vindicated and remembered, and to avoid a linear, teleological kind of narrative that would not do justice to the diasporic condition. The way the short story cycle functions is by

¹⁵ Emmanuel Constant, who has been identified by Edwidge Danticat as her inspiration for *The Dew Breaker*, founded a militia that terrorized supporters of ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and when Aristide returned to power in 1994 Constant fled to New York where, in spite of having been condemned in Haiti, he lived free because of his connections to the CIA (Bellamy 2012: n10).

calling attention to the process of narrative construction, and like the seams in patchwork or a scar, the borders previous to the connection are not obviated but made visible. The focus on the interstitial, on the gaps, on the wound inherent in each particular scar helps avoid a totalizing, redemptive kind of narrative, which might become a form of traumatic denial. The content is never completely described, the story is never fully told, for each is full of gaps, silences and ellipses, each story promotes more questions, and connection is simultaneously searched for and frustrated. When the independence of each of the stories and characters is recognized, easy modes of identification are challenged and they cannot be so easily appropriated. In this sense, Danticat succeeds in responding to Jill Bennett's view that in postcolonial literature, theory and politics, it is an ethical imperative to share suffering "via a form of heteropathic identification" (2003: 181), that is, that art and its reception should avoid an identification with the pain of the other based on sameness, which is centered on the self and risks annihilation of the other's experience, and promote instead a relationship of identification at a distance that acknowledges the other as other.¹⁶ All this is certainly made more obvious in an independent reading of the cycle stories.

At the same time, the presence of relations between the different stories and characters prevents us from comfortably adopting a view of their traumas as totally inaccessible, unspeakable or hopeless. This may not be a harmonious or homogeneous community, but it is a community anyway, characterized by cultural and generational tensions that make both Haiti and the US a complex mixture of home and unhome. On the other hand, the text is an act of resistance in the sense that it challenges the supposed unspeakability of trauma, emphasizing, as Danticat states, that "[i]t is not our way to let our grief silence us" (Shea 2010:188), and that it is possible and necessary to find a literary form to give a voice to the Haitian diaspora. Clearly this responds to the unquestionable relation of grief to the search for meaning, for "[f]inding meaning in suffering and in life is [...] the best and perhaps the only way for a human being to adapt" (Konner 2007:325). Meaning is of course not found in a void, as Bracken explains by resorting to Heidegger's idea of *being-in-the-world*, for "traumatic experiences are profoundly *entangled* with the way we are grounded and existing *in the world*" (Borzaga 2012:76, original emphasis). Our ties to others—where "others" may be understood as other people, places, worldviews—are a necessary part of ourselves, in such a way that, in Judith Butler's words,

¹⁶ Jill Bennett is drawing from Kaja Silverman, who in turn recovered the distinction between idiopathic and heteropathic identification from the German philosopher Max Scheler. The concept of heteropathic identification may be useful to account for some critics' views on the difficulty for readers to identify with the characters in *The Dew Breaker*, most notably Collins and Rohrleitner.

[w]hen we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. (2004:22)

Taking stock of our interdependence does not mean, argues Butler, that we are “merged or without boundaries” (27), but that “we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings” (28). The way grief becomes a means to know the self by unveiling one’s relations to others is best observed in a sequential reading that encourages the search for connection. All in all, we may privilege independence or community, we may emphasize trauma or favor healing, we may read stories independently or as a sequence, but the point is to recognize that all of these possibilities are there in a text that is claiming to be read in its own terms as opposed to having a preexisting critical view imposed on it.¹⁷

If we agree with Lily Cho that “[n]o one is born diasporic. Rather, one *becomes* diasporic through a complex process of memory and emergence” (2007:21), then Danticat’s constant writing about the motherland she had to leave when she was only twelve is reflecting this constant revision of memory that characterizes the diasporic subjectivity, which “straddle[s] the divide between past and present” (20), and is “marked by sorrow and loss as well as by the pleasures of connection” (17). *The Dew Breaker* becomes a good illustration of such a process and, when reading it as a short story cycle, we reinforce the idea that the personal is political as we acknowledge that the political is, and will remain, indeed very personal. All in all, as we look at the scar on a man’s face, we may be relieved with the possibility of healing as we grieve for the wounds that remain open. The scars—physical, psychological, textual—are both a sign of erasure and a sign of visibility, of difference and relation, and, like the past, they both divide and unite.

¹⁷ Besides the relevance of looking at the generic form in its own terms, for this short story cycle can be related to the Haitian oral storytelling tradition, *The Dew Breaker* offers various culture-specific elements that are unfortunately outside the scope of this paper, most notably the understanding of time, the tidalectic framework, both studied by Mehta, and the aforementioned Marasa or twin motif studied by Vega González (2007) and Bellamy.

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