

Joan Conwell

Papa's Masks: Roles of the Father in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*

Edwidge Danticat writes frequently about silence, distance, mothers, and the mother-daughter relationship, as in her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In *The Dew Breaker*, her fifth book-length work of fiction, she again addresses silence, particularly the responsibility of the voiced to the voiceless and the role of the artist in recording history. However, the novel's dominant metaphor for the structure beneath power and oppression in Haiti is the father. There is not a typecast role for the father in *The Dew Breaker*, but a myriad of masks that the father wears. Danticat's work does not imply that patriarchy or male power in itself is responsible for the ongoing trials of the Haitians. Rather, to borrow Jungian terminology without getting bogged down in its "essentialism," the shadow side of the father archetype seems to hold the historical nexus of power there. In Danticat's work, the father is ultimately unknowable—yet his behavior can fit into one or more of three categories: 1) dictatorial, sadistic and self-deifying; 2) neutrally distant, elusive, absent or mad; or 3) strong, committed and self-reflective. Understanding the father as a metaphor for the historical relationship between the powered and the powerless in Haiti is one way to look at the underlying structure of Haiti's trials, and at the same time to offer a note of optimism for its future.

The Dew Breaker consists of nine short stories sufficiently interwoven to be considered a novel. The central character is an unnamed Duvalier-era *Tonton Macoute*, who, after wielding power and torture at Haiti's infamous Casernes prison, flees to New York. There he starts a family and lives among his former victims and their families. Three stories offer a close-up view of the Dew Breaker, whom, depending on the context, I will refer to

as the Dew Breaker or M. Bienamé: “The Book of the Dead,” “Book of Miracles,” and “The Dew Breaker;” the first, fourth and ninth stories respectively. The novel’s other stories concern characters whose lives have been forever altered by this central, highly-complex character.

Extremes of patriarchal power and violence have been present in Haiti since the beginning when European explorers nearly obliterated the native population of Arawak Indians and the French-imported African slaves to create a prosperous sugar and coffee-producing colony (Nazière). After the slave revolts that won Haiti its independence from France, even Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the venerated revolutionary hero and one of the “fathers” of the new black republic, used brutality and mass execution to hold on to power (Bell “Chronology of Historic Events” 523). Outside powers such as the United States exerted influence and periodically occupied Haiti. There is not room in a paper of this scope to detail the violent examples of patriarchal power that have beset the people of Haiti continuously since the time Columbus landed on Hispaniola, and what Danticat herself has called the underlying “structure” (Birnbaum 7) of the conditions there. Violence in Haiti has been passed down through the regimes as if from father to son. But Danticat was a young child in Haiti during the brutal regimes of dictators François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, two twentieth century figures responsible for much Haiti’s ongoing suffering. The regimes of these tyrants, along with more recent events, continue to play a prominent role in her fiction, so my essay will concentrate on this more recent history.

After the 1991 coup that removed the democratically-elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power, thousands more were tortured and killed by military “attachés” (*After the Dance* 73; Bracken; Grann 54), the terror-wielding heads of mafia-style organizations with names like FRAPH (Front for Advancement and Progress of Haiti). Since Aristide’s second ouster, tyranny has returned in various guises, from the armed militiamen running the capital (Malveaux 1) to the roving gangs such as those armed with machetes, plundering emergency food and water aid brought to Gonaïves after Hurricane Jeanne submerged that city in September 2004 (Brown 20).

Playing God—Dictator as Divine Father

In *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat often alludes to the extremes of political power exercised during the regimes of “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son “Baby Doc.” Using allegory, she ties those abuses of power to other examples of brutality in Haiti, from the time of those regimes to the historical present. In this manner, we can witness in one volume, and indeed in a

single short story, the trickle-down effect of the corruption of power from the top to bottom of the Haitian social stratum. Here I will briefly outline three categories of Duvalier's gross, self-deifying misuse of power, and then show how those categories also apply to the particular *Tonton Macoute* character central to Danticat's novel.

Born in 1907, Duvalier came to power espousing the previous president's plan for social reform (Diederich 21) and a *noiriste* philosophy (Nicholls xxxii) that would uplift the downtrodden. A medical anthropologist and M.D. (Littlewood 6), he added to his appeal by embracing *Vodou*, and succeeded in apotheosizing himself to the point of self-deification. Like so many of the world's most brutal tyrants, he publicly executed his detractors, and used torture and imprisonment to censure. But it was by using religion that he secured his self-appointed role as familial and spiritual "father" of Haiti, rendering his power near limitless.

In the nonfiction *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*, Danticat tours the cemetery in Jacmel, noting the multi-layered symbolism she finds there, and indeed that can be found throughout religious life in Haiti,

The crosses [topping the mausoleum steeples] can be interpreted in many ways: as symbols of Christianity, Christ's crucifixion and death, as with the Virgin Mary vines, but also as representations of the guardian of the cemetery, the *Vodou* divinity Baron Samedi. Baron Samedi, the patron god, or *Iwa*, of the cemetery, is honored with Day of the Dead services, held in cemeteries in early November.

During my childhood in Haiti, the dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier would dress like Baron Samedi. Donning a black hat, dark suit, and coattails, he was reminding all Haitians that he literally held the key to the cemeteries and could decide at will who the next inhabitants would be. (30)

She adds parenthetically, "A 1963 *Life* magazine article quotes Duvalier as saying, 'When they [Haitians] ask me, 'Who is our Mother?' I tell them, 'The Virgin.' But when they ask, 'Who is our Father?' then I must answer, 'No one—you have only me'" (*After the Dance* 30).

Duvalier is not only father, but "Father" with a capital "F," public arbiter of life and death. In "The Dew Breaker," the final story of the book, Danticat says,

The president, often referred to as the Sovereign One, had been heard on the radio announcing the execution

of nineteen young officers, members of the palace guard, who the president thought had betrayed him. The president, also known as the Renovator of the Fatherland, had listed the officers' names, roll-call style, on the radio, had answered "absent" for each of them, then had calmly announced, "They have been shot."
(188-9)

Just how seriously Duvalier took his personal usurpation of religion is evident from the new 1964 constitution that he enacted when he declared himself "president for life." He created a hagiography deifying himself. In *Papa Doc: Haiti and Its Dictator*, Diederich writes that the new constitution praised Duvalier for, among other things "ensuring peace," protecting "mother, children, women, and family," and "creating a strong nation, the pride of its sons" (Diederich (278-9). Duvalier also produced and printed a booklet substituting "the Roman Catholic explanation of the Holy Trinity with a Papa Doc version.

(Q) Who are Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion and Estimé?

(A) Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion and Estimé are five founders of the nation who are found within François Duvalier.

(Q) Is Dessalines for life?

(A) Yes, Dessalines is for life in François Duvalier.

(This same question and answer were listed for the other four historical figures.)

(Q) Do we conclude that there are six presidents for life?

(A) No, Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion and Estimé are five distinct chiefs of state but who form only one and the same President in François Duvalier." (279)

In the title story, Danticat includes Duvalier's widely quoted, bastardized version of the Lord's Prayer included in the pamphlet:

Our father who art in the national palace, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done, in the capital, as it is in the provinces. Give us this day our new Haiti and forgive us our anti-patriotic thoughts, but do not forgive those anti-patriots who spit on our country and trespass against it. Let them succumb to the weight of their own venom. And deliver them not from evil. (184-5)

If, to many, Duvalier successfully transformed himself into a syncretization of *Vodou* divinity and Catholic Father, detractors considered

him quite the opposite—a Mephistophelian character. God or devil, the dictator is still ascribed divine power by the people, an ascription which can not help but permeate the entire political context. The tyrant's critics, it should be noted, also used religion to promote their cause, and often paid the ultimate price for the insult.

Those at the presidential palace who monitored such things were at first annoyed, then enraged that the preacher was not sticking to the “The more you suffer on earth, the more glorious your heavenly reward” script. In his radio sermons... the preacher called on the ghosts of brave men and women in the Bible who'd fought tyrants and nearly died He exalted Queen Esther, who had intervened to halt a massacre of her people; Daniel, who had tamed lions intended to devour him; David, who had pebbled Goliath's defeat; and Jonah, who had risen out of the belly of a sea beast.

“And what will we do with *our* beast?” the preacher encouraged his followers to chant from beside their radios at home, as well as from the plain wooden pews of his sanctuary.

He liked to imagine the whole country screaming, “What will we do with our beast?” but instead it seemed as if everyone was walking around whispering the sanctioned national prayer, written by the president himself. (185)

When the preacher's devotees were asked what they meant by “beast,” they said, “When we talk about a beast, we mean Satan, the devil” (186). If they considered Duvalier to be Evil incarnate, “beast” would refer to both Satan and Duvalier. Ironically, the preacher does lose his life as a result of his outspokenness, but it is the Dew Breaker not Duvalier who ultimately kills him for his own ends, even after receiving the government order to release him.

In “The Book of the Dead,” the first story in *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat depicts a symbolic transfer of power from Duvalier to the narrator's father, the ex-*Tonton Macoute* at the novel's center. The story opens with narrator, Ka Bienaimé, reporting her father missing to a Florida hotel manager and police officer. She and her father are on their way from home in East Flatbush, Brooklyn to Tampa to deliver the narrator's sculpture to the famous Haitian-American actress Gabrielle Fonteneau. The iconic sculpture in mahogany, simply called “Father,” is how the narrator imagined her father thirty years earlier as a political prisoner in Haiti under the Duvalier

dictatorship—”naked, kneeling on a half-foot square base, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his eyes downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands” (6). The famous actress admires the sculpture because it is “regal and humble at the same time” and reminds her of her own father (11).

Both Ka’s father and the sculpture have disappeared from the hotel in the middle of the night. When her father finally returns, it is minus the sculpture. He confesses to his daughter that he was not, as she believed, a political prisoner in Haiti before his exile, but a *Tonton Macoute*, a feared torturer and killer working for the Duvalier dictatorship. When she asks where the sculpture is, he replies that he has “objections” (13). He drives her to where he has thrown the sculpture into an artificial lake. She and her father go to the Fonteneau house without the piece, and once the actress learns that the sculpture is no longer extant, she quickly dismisses the narrator.

The nine stories of *The Dew Breaker* unfold, revealing layer after layer of the catastrophic impact Ka’s father has on the lives around him. In “The Bridal Seamstress,” one of his former torture victims explains the origin of the term “dew breaker,” “shoukét laroze” in Creole. “We called them shoukét laroze,” Beatrice said, the couch’s plastic cover squeaking beneath her. “They’d break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they’d also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they’d take you away. He was one of them, the guard” (131). If we consider three aspects of deity: 1) power over life and death; 2) connection to the miraculous; and 3) omnipotence or omnipresence; we can see that both Duvalier and the Dew Breaker of Danticat’s novel possess or are believed by others to possess all three qualities. The allegorical connection between the Dew Breaker and the regime he serves becomes apparent as the narrator explains her father’s obsession with Egyptian art and eschatology.

When the narrator was a child, her father often took her to the Ancient Egyptian rooms at the Brooklyn museum:

“The Egyptians, they was like us,” he likes to say. The Egyptians worshipped their gods in many forms, fought among themselves, and were also ruled by foreigners. The pharaohs were like the dictators he had fled, and their queens were as beautiful as Gabrielle Fonteneau. But what he most admires about the Ancient Egyptians is the way they mourn their dead....

My whole adult life, I have struggled to find the proper manner of sculpting my father, a quiet and distant man who only came alive while standing with me most of the Saturday mornings of my childhood,

mesmerized by the golden masks, the shawabtis, the schist tablets, Isis, Nefertiti, and Osiris, the jackal-headed ruler of the underworld (*Dewbreaker* 12-13).

But of course there are parallels that Danticat doesn't mention—both Haiti and ancient Egypt are and were highly stratified societies, dependent on slavery for periods in their history. Of critical importance, the Egyptian Pharaohs were not only “like” the dictators, but ruled society through a system of divine kingship (Adams 79), promoting the belief that once they died in their human form they became gods—even Osiris, god of the underworld. As Duvalier, dressed himself as Baron Samedi, *Vodou* god of the underworld, and enacted his own brand of divine kingship, there is a direct link between Duvalier and the Egyptian pharaohs. Interestingly, Adams notes that “when the Egyptian throne was handed down from father to son, it was seen as a symbolic transfer from Osiris to Horus” (97). Although “Baby Doc” reigned with terror as had his father, he and his wife eventually fled Haiti after an uprising of the people. Franklin Foer contends in a *slate.com* piece on Odai and Qusai Hussein that dictators “raise sons who abjectly fail at the family business” as a result of their self-indulgent life styles and differing application of violence—fathers, “calculatingly” using “rape, torture, and murder to tighten their grip on power;” sons, incapable of restraint, chemically addicted and throwing “bratty” tantrums (“The Dictator’s Son”). Nevertheless, oppression as an inherited legacy shows up again and again.

“Book of the Dead”—*destroying the sculpture*

It initially appears as though M. Bienaimé's rejection/obliteration of Ka's sculpture in “Book of the Dead” has to do with a sense of shame and guilt about his past. On a first reading, we have not yet learned his history. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, we anticipate that because of some evil he perpetrated in the past, he feels unworthy of the adulation that the sculpture offers,

“Do you recall the judgment of the dead,” my father speaks up at last, “when the heart of a person is put on a scale? If it's heavy, the heart, then this person cannot enter the other world.” (19)

“I don't deserve a statue.” (19)

He is preoccupied with judgment after death, again substituting the judgment of the dead as described by the Egyptian Book of the Dead for his earlier (although later in the text) syncretism of Catholicism and *Vodou*. But behind any reading suggesting M. Bienaimé's humility is the inescapable fact that his destruction of the sculpture, his own daughter's creation, is an

aggressive act driven by fear of judgment as well as a need for power that mirrors his earlier brutalities against his victims. Had he not destroyed the sculpture, he would have been immortalized as one of his own victims. By “drowning” an idolatrous image of himself he is displeased with, even a falsely beatifying one, he returns to the same censorship role that he relished more than thirty years before. At that time, as we later learn, he was employed by the Duvalier regime to serve and protect it from “anti-patriotism.” In fact, he ran his own sub-regime in which he served himself before the palace, as evidenced in the last story, “The Dew Breaker” when he twice defies direct orders, first by capturing the preacher instead of resolving the “problem” of the preacher’s insubordination outside of the prison; second, by killing the preacher, when ordered to release him (216, 229).

Furthermore, Danticat casts the Dew Breaker as the fictional captor of the real-life political novelist Stephen Jacques Alexis (198), whose fate, presumably at the hands of the regime, was never actually determined (*General Sun*). In effect, the Dew Breaker “disappears” Alexis for his (portrait-like) description of the *Macoute’s* job. “*Tu deviens un véritable gendarme, un bourreau,*” Alexis writes (*Dew Breaker* 198). Torture becomes “like any other job.” All of this systematic wiping out of unflattering portraits by the Dew Breaker echoes what took place on a larger scale by the regime as a whole. As an example, in “The Funeral Singer,” the eighth story, the character Mariselle’s artist husband who had painted an unflattering portrait of the president is “shot leaving the show” (172).

In case there is doubt as to the aggression behind his plunging his daughter’s sculpture into the lake (not only depriving her of her creation, but of her livelihood and the professional pride in producing a commissioned piece of artwork), there is a tangible echo of his violent behavior in years past. Ka says,

I tend to wave my hands about wildly when I laugh, but I don’t notice I’m doing that now until he reaches over to grab them. I quickly move them away, but he ends up catching my right wrist, the same wrist Officer Bo had stroked earlier to make me shut up. My father holds on to it so tightly now that I feel his fingers crushing the bone, almost splitting it apart, and I can’t laugh anymore.

“Let go,” I say, and he releases my wrist quickly. He looks down at his own fingers, then lowers his hand to his lap.

My wrist is still throbbing. I keep stroking it to relieve some of the pain. It’s the ache there that makes me

want to cry more than anything, not so much this sudden,
uncharacteristic flash of anger from my father. (20)

By depicting Ka's father/the Dew Breaker grabbing her wrist at the same spot where the American police officer left his imprint, Danticat reminds us that although the stories deal with abuse of power in Haiti, that does not mean that we are immune from it here in the States.

In any case, it is difficult to reconcile the "quiet, distant" father that Ka has grown up with, and the sadistic man of years earlier we witness in the final story. We learn that back at Casernes:

He liked questioning the prisoners, teaching them to play zo and bezik, stapling clothespins to their ears if they lost and removing them as he let them win, convincing them that their false victories would save their lives. (198)

Thirty years later, an eighty-something-year-old former victim of his tells an interviewer, "He'd wound you, then try to soothe you with words, then he'd wound you again. He thought he was God" (198-9). Interestingly, paralleling Duvalier's rejection of formal Christianity and embracing of traditional *Vodou*, the Dew Breaker rationalizes his arbitrary exercise of power over the life and death of others as a defense against what he considers the oppression of religion:

In slaying the preacher, he could tell himself, he would actually be freeing an entire section of Bel-Air, men, women, and children who had been brainwashed with rites of incessant prayers and milky clothes. He'd be liberating them, he reasoned, from a Bible that had maligned them, pegged them as slaves, and told them to obey their masters.... With their preacher gone, the masses of Bel-Air would be more likely to turn back to their ancestral beliefs, he told himself, creeds carried over the ocean by forbears who had squirmed, wailed, and nearly suffocated in the hulls of Middle Passage *kanntès, nègriers, slave ships.*" (188)

So what force allows the apparent change in the man so that he can be the Dew Breaker in Haiti and a quiet family man in East Flatbush? The same one that further deifies him, at least in the eyes of his own wife.

"Book of Miracles"—*transformation is a godlike miracle*

In "Book of Miracles," Anne, Ka's mother, wife of the Dew Breaker, and, as we learn in a later story, stepsister to the Dew Breaker's final victim (209),

is a devout Catholic obsessed with religious miracles. Over and over again, she tells stories such as the one about the “twelve-year-old Lebanese girl who cried crystal tears” (69). She wants to believe her husband’s metamorphosis from torturer to family man is one of these divinely-inspired miracles. When her daughter requests another miracle story, Anne thinks,

A long time ago, more than thirty years ago, in Haiti, your father worked in a prison, where he hurt many people. Now look at him. Look how calm he is. Look how patient he is. Look how he just drove forty miles, to your apartment in Westchester, to pick you up for Christmas Eve Mass. That was the miracle Anne wanted to share with her daughter on this Christmas Eve night, the simple miracle of her husband’s transformation....” (72-3)

Bienaimé sees a different, yet still spiritual explanation for his transformation, mixing the Egyptian concept of “ka” with the traditional Haitian belief in “ti-bon-ange.” “You see, ka is like soul,” he tells his daughter, explaining why he named her “Ka.” “In Haiti is what we call good angel, ti bon anj. When you born, I look at your face, I think, here is my ka, my good angel” (17).

Anne’s belief in the miraculous nature of her husband’s transformation from Macoute in Haiti to “good” father in Flatbush, and Bienaimé’s association of the transformation with “ti bon ange” contrast nicely with the depiction of his earlier transformation from rural peasant boy to more cosmopolitan agent of the regime. Bienaimé joins the Duvalier military after visiting Port-au-Prince as a young man and witnessing Duvalier dressed up as Baron Samedi delivering a speech. Standing there in the crowd, Bienaimé has a miraculous vision:

After the third, fourth, or fifth hour of the speech, he found himself dreaming. He thought he saw a flock of winged women circling above the palace dome, angry sibyls ranging in hue from cinnamon, honey, bronze, sable, to jet-black, hissing through the rest of the speech.

Later he would tell one of the many women he’d eventually take to bed, “I thought they were angels, caryatids, maybe a soul for each of us standing there in the sun.” (193)

A perception of divinely connected or miraculous occurrences marks each of the Dew Breaker’s moments of personality transformation.

“Book of Miracles” also ties the oppressive, patriarchal and reli-

giously manipulative power of Duvalier and his Macoutes to more recent oppressors. The Bienaimé family—Anne, Ka and the Dew Breaker—attend Christmas Eve Mass in Brooklyn. Ka believes she sees Emmanuel “Toto” Constant at the service. Constant is the real-life former leader of FRAPH, an organization of the military regime after Aristide’s initial ouster in the 1990s that bore a striking resemblance to the Tonton Macoutes of the Duvalier era. Despite his organization’s responsibility for the alleged rape, murder and torture of thousands of people, he was allowed to enter the United States and live freely in Queens, where he worked as a real estate agent and his fellow Haitians called him “the devil” and tallied sightings of him (Grann 54). Even in New York there was a connection to the late “Papa Doc”—Constant was seen “clad in black” dancing in a disco on the Day of the Dead, Baron Samedi’s day (54). Constant’s father, Gerard Emmanuel Constant, was military chief of staff under Duvalier. *Atlantic Monthly* writer David Grann quotes Constant:

“I was inheriting all my father’s protection and power and people. It was a symbolic transference.” In his private papers, Constant wrote, “My prominence, some might argue, is destiny.... To be the first son of General Gerard Emmanuel Constant is the call to arms for Emmanuel Gerard Constant, myself.” (Grann)

“Bridal Seamstress”—*Omnipresent shadow*

A god-like characteristic that links all three men—Duvalier, the Dew Breaker, and Emmanuel Constant—in Danticat’s novel and in life, is their apparent all-seeing, all-powerful omnipresence. In “The Bridal Seamstress” a young Haitian-American journalism intern in New York interviews a retiring seamstress about her career and discovers that she is haunted by specter of a man who tortured her in Haiti for refusing to go dancing with him. She knows that he too has relocated to New York, sees him, and is haunted by his shadow at every turn:

“What are you going to do after you retire?” Aline asked, trying to complete the interview.

“Move, again.” Beatrice pressed the thimble between her palms, rolling it up and down as if to warm it.

“Why?” Aline asked. (131).

“This man, wherever I rent or buy a house in this city, I find him living on my street.” (132)

Aline wonders whether Beatrice is actually seeing the same man who tortured her. She doubts the old woman’s sanity, but approaches the house

identified as the Dew Breaker's. She peeks in and finds the house unoccupied, and a neighbor tells her that no one has lived there for over a year. Aline goes back and confronts Beatrice about the empty house. Beatrice responds,

“Of course it's empty”....

“That's where he hides out these days, in empty houses. Otherwise he'd be in jail, paying for his crimes.”

“I think the reason he finds me all the time is because I send notes out to my girls,” Beatrice said, keeping her eyes on the street. “I let all my girls know when I move, in case they want to bring other girls to me. That's how he always 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.” (137)

Not only are these men omnipresent, she seems to feel, but there must be something supernatural about the situation or else someone would hold them accountable for the suffering they caused.

Mad Father, Trickster Father, Distant Father, Absent Father

Rumors had been circulating that the president and his wife might be fleeing the country. The president had gone on television to deny the rumors, saying he was as “unyielding as a monkey's tail.”

I didn't know much about monkeys back then, except for a proverb that said if you teach a monkey how to throw stones, it will throw the first one at your head. So I asked Romain to tell me about monkeys' tails.

Monkeys with short tails live on the ground, he'd said, and those with longer tails make their homes closer to the sky, in high trees. Some tree monkeys have tails that are longer than their bodies, tails that they use to swing from tree to tree. We'd both laughed, wondering which kind of monkey's tail our president had imagined himself to be. (160)

“*We are all born mad.*” The preacher now recalled that particular line from the play. “*Some remain so*” (204).

The guise of the oppressive father in *The Dew Breaker* is by no means the only mask Danticat's paternal characters wear. The novel is rife with trickster fathers—mad, absent or distant. The Dew Breaker's own father is mad

(191). When he dreams about his childhood, his dream father moves “gently” toward his mother (235), but we do not know what their relationship is like during waking hours. In the midst of his brutality the Dew Breaker has moments when he wishes he could enact a gentler form of paternalism. As he waits to detain and ultimately kill the preacher, he establishes a brief connection with a boy in the street who buys him cigarettes. “There was a part of him that wished he could buy that child a future, buy all children like that a future. Perhaps not the future he would have himself, not the path his life would take, but another kind of destiny” (194). But he does not “buy” the boy a future, and even after he has “miraculously” transformed into the “good” father of Anne’s perception, his daughter describes him as a “distant man” and does not know him, except for his admiration of ancient Egyptian art (13).

“He was a short-tailed one, but now he’s a long-tailed one,” Romain had said. ‘He’s looking for another tree’” (160). The play on words starting in the title of the seventh story, “Monkey Tails,” alerts us that the story itself will subvert the power structure, and it does. Henry Louis Gates argues that the “signifying monkey” figure in African-American literature, originating as a slave trope and kin to the divine-trickster figure Esu-Elegbara of the Yoruba culture (and the Vodou Papa Legba [5]), connotes “fantasies of reversal of power relationships” (Gates 59). The long-tailed/short-tailed quotation above accomplishes two things. The representation of “Baby Doc” as a monkey at all connects him to a long line of trickster figures represented by the “signifying monkey” in black narrative and literature. The fact that the monkey changes his tail from long to short at will, merely underscores the trope. Michel and Roumain laughing at the Duvalier’s whimsy in his simian guise is the kind of desire for the reversal of power relationships that Gates discusses. Since the monkey himself is the one who “signifies,” Michel and Roumain are “signifyin(g)” the signifier.

When “Baby Doc” Duvalier and his wife flee Haiti in 1986, violence breaks out with citizens seeking revenge against former regime militiamen. Twelve-year-old Michel accompanies the eighteen-year-old Romain who is searching for his father amid the chaos—a father who abandoned him, was a presidential *Tonton Macoute*, and whose life is now in danger. At the outset of the story, Michel wants to believe his mother’s story of his own father:

According to my mother, three months before my birth I had lost my father to something my mother would only vaguely describe as “political,” making me part of a generation of mostly fatherless boys, though some of our fathers were still living, even if somewhere else—in

the provinces, in another country, or across the alley not acknowledging us. A great many of our fathers had also died in the dictatorship's prisons, and others had abandoned us altogether to serve the regime. (141)

As the story progresses, Romain forces Michel to accept that he is actually the unacknowledged son of the power-wielding neighborhood water broker, Christophe (159-60). Michel wants to confront his mother about this when she says,

Monsieur Christophe managed to get his water turned off, but not before everyone in the neighborhood got enough to use for days in case the situation takes a bad turn and we're all trapped inside our houses, like in the old days before you were born, under the father.

"The father?" I asked dumbly.

I knew she meant the dictator father of the dictator son, but somehow I wanted to offer her an opening into a conversation that even then I knew we'd never have.... (162)

Christophe also has an openly acknowledged son, Tobin, to whom he later bequeaths the tap station. Also living in Michel's house is a *restavèk*, a slave child:

"I knew that girl was not sweeping all the way under the beds," my mother said... The "girl" she was referring to was Rosie, a distant cousin my mother had summoned from the provinces to do such things as cook and wash and sweep under the beds, when she's promised Rosie's poor peasant parents that she'd be sending her to school. In fact, the only education Rosie was getting was from talking to the people who came to buy colas at a busy intersection where my mother stationed her.... (142)

So from the fleeing dictator down to the slave child there is a seemingly endless chain of corruption by those in power. But in this case, at the bottom rung of the ladder is a female maternal character oppressing a female child, rather than a paternal figure as dictator.

Strength, commitment and self-reflection: hope for the future

"Monkey Tails" is told in split format: Michel in 2004 New York reflects back on 1986 Haiti. He remembers his and Romain's own search

for their fathers and their discovery that no one was truly a father to them. It is in the context of this search and discovery, along with his friendship with Romain who encourages him with the words of Socrates to “Know thyself and you will know the world of the gods” (153), that Michel becomes a man. In bed with his pregnant wife in 2004, he addresses the story to his unborn son, whom he will name after his friend (164). We understand that Michel possesses the strength of character to father justly and with self-reflection.

In “Night Talkers,” Dany travels back to Beau Jour, a Haitian mountain village, to tell his aunt that he has found the man who murdered his parents in front of him when he was a child. Dany is renting an apartment in his house in Brooklyn. In Beau Jour, he is not able to elicit answers about his parents’ lives or fully communicate his thoughts before his aunt dies in her sleep. In the village, Dany meets Claude, twice exiled from the United States. Claude has been to prison for murdering his father while high on drugs. Dany initially spurns Claude for his apparent lack of remorse over his crime (103). When given the opportunity to kill the murderer of his parents, Dany allows conscience to dictate:

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)

Once his aunt dies before she and Dany can communicate about the horrors of their past, Dany gains a new empathy for Claude and admiration of his ability to communicate his own story. He considers that, “perhaps Claude had never learned how to grieve or help others grieve. Maybe the death of a parent early in life, either by one’s own hand or by others, eliminated that instinct in a person” (119). In the last paragraph of the story is a note of reserved optimism for the future:

“The only thing to do for his aunt now was to keep Claude speaking[,] which wouldn’t be so hard, since Claude was already one of them, a member of their tribe” (120). The implication is that Dany can teach Claude to grieve, and in turn learn from him how to voice his truth. By helping each other they can each become stronger in ways that will serve them and their progeny, should they decide to become fathers.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that in a 1996 interview discussing *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat rejected the interviewer's attempt to link the mother-daughter relationship to the colonial mother, saying, "It's true that mother-daughter relationships are relationships of power, but I don't see that as a metaphor for mother country" (Shea 383). For a discussion of how Danticat does in that novel inscribe the memories of sexual violence against women into the "historical narrative" of Haiti, see Donette Francis' "'Silences too horrific to disturb': writing sexual histories in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*."

² Danticat has been called a "voice for the voiceless," as in Wucker's profile.

³ M. Charlene Ball cites feminist and African-American scholars Frye Pratt and Campbell who have usefully revised archetypal theory to explore feminist and African-American literature (62).

⁴ Duvalier's militia was named after the mythic figure *Tonton Macoute*, "a bogeyman who abducted naughty children at night and put them in his knapsack" (*Dew Breaker* 216).

⁵ Although the Dew Breaker is unnamed in the text, his unmarried daughter's name is Ka Bienaimé, with the last name meaning good friend in French, and his Creole interpretation of the Egyptian word "Ka 'for soul, 'ti bon anj" meaning good angel. Ka's name is therefore: "Soul/good angel/ Good friend."

⁶ Notable exceptions are *The Farming of Bones* which details Trujillo's 1937 massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and Danticat's forthcoming juvenile novel about Anacaona, a pre-Columbian female indigenous warrior (Birnbaum 12-13).

⁷ For a recent piece of scholarship chronicling the effect of the "devouring" figure of Duvalier on Haitian literature, see Rafael Lucas' "The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature."

⁸ Nicholls notes that despite Duvalier's rhetoric, "the mulatto elite remained economically powerful and socially exclusive, particularly when questions of marriage arose" (xxxii).

⁹ Danticat mentions in an interview that such a forgiving name describing one who enacts such heinous crimes is testament to the Haitians' forgiving nature.

¹⁰ In this passage, as in other passages—especially in the story "Seven,"—characters react to the real-life beating, rape and killing of unarmed Haitian men in New York by white police officers.

¹¹ In his glossary, "Another Devil's Dictionary" in *All Souls Rising*,

Madison Smartt Bell cites Wade Davis' explanation of "ti-bon-ange": "literally, the 'little good angel,' an aspect of the *vodoun* soul. 'The ti-bon-ange is that part of the soul directly associated with the individual.... It's one's aura, and the source of all personality, character and will-power'" (530).

¹² Both "Ovid's Jacmel" in Danticat's *After the Dance* and Lucas' "Aesthetics of Degradation" (62) alert to the rural/urban contrast in the literature as well as the actuality of Haitian life.

¹³ See Gates' book for an exhaustive definition of "signifyin(g)."

¹⁴ See Jean-Robert Cadet's "Restavèk" in Danticat's *The Butterfly's Way*, or his book by the same name for a first-person account of life of the Haitian slave children who belong to more affluent blacks and mulattoes, an institution, Cadet says, which has existed since emancipation and Haitian independence (15).

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