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The Black Atlantic Zombie: National Schisms and Utopian Diasporas in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*

Since the early 1990s black diasporic studies have become the dominant critical framework within which texts by contemporary Caribbean writers have been held for examination. On the one hand, it seems to be quite appropriate given that many writers are domiciled away from the Caribbean. On the other hand, however, some critics, such as Alison Donnell, have often argued that diasporic studies rely too heavily on historically and politically scripted movements of populations to talk about a side-effect of these movements – the formation of diasporic, cultural subjectivities that thrive in the metropolitan centres.¹

I wish to contend that the book *The Dew Breaker* written by the Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat,² often considered the chief spokesperson for millions of Haitian refugees in diaspora in the USA, validates Alison Donnell's observation. *The Dew Breaker* takes issue with the unduly optimistic valorization of diaspora. It shows that Danticat is more interested in the political and ethical dimension of the metropolitan encounter, than in celebrating the metropole as a liberatory place to be applauded, lauded and venerated. The multiple migrant tales included in this collection show that the immigrant's empowerment of the self, so often eulogized by postcolonial critics, is not a one-man success story, as it is often achieved at the price

¹ Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 83.

² As a Haitian American, Edwidge Danticat, writes and publishes in English, which is untypical for Haitian writers who are mostly francophone.

of dissolution of moral responsibility and detachment from the family and community.

I will also argue that in her efforts to demystify the Black Atlantic myth Danticat does not fall back on the competing ideology of nationalism. Danticat's collection demonstrates the pitfalls of pursuing the belief in ethno-national exclusivity and Haitian cultural exceptionalism, which for decades dominated Haitian writing. *The Dew Breaker* refuses to comply with the myth of the Haitian uniqueness that was promoted by the rhetoric of nationalism. It exposes the nationalistic evaluation of Haiti as a timeless and immaculate place of tranquil retreat as a dangerous fallacy by foregrounding the history of political upheavals in Haiti in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Dew Breaker deals with terror and trauma caused by the horrifying system of repression, predation and impoverishment brought by the Duvalier's terrorist regime. François Duvalier was the president of Haiti from 1956, when he was elected on a populist and Black Nationalist platform, until his death in 1971. He first won acclaim as a country doctor, which earned him the nickname "Papa Doc" ("Daddy Doctor" in French). As President for Life, he gained unsavoury immortality as the most predatory Haitian dictator. He entrenched his rule through terror and political crimes, and it is estimated that thirty or even, fifty thousand Haitians were killed by his regime, whereas many more had to flee the country. Duvalier's rule was based on a rural militia called *Tonton Macoutes*,³ who were really a secret police that employed corruption and intimidation to create new elites of the country. They were instrumental in the government's take-over of industries, bribery, extortion of domestic businesses and farms.

Duvalier's rhetoric of nationalism can be traced back to the US occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), which, as J. Michael puts it, was "Haiti's irruption into Modernity," whereby "[the] parochial, francophone world [of Haiti] [was] disrupted by the tastes and values of American culture." American attempts to modernize Haiti by force gave rise to national resistance that "questioned Modernity itself and Haiti's place within the world systems of the Enlightenment, capitalism, and imperialism. The argument went: Haiti had failed because of modernization and the only solution was to find a pre-modern alternative."⁴ Duvalier's concept of *noirism* (Black Nationalism) was a part of the nationalist project of healing the national psyche after the US occupation by means of providing Haitians with a new folkloric model of culture and identity that was "outside the ills inflicted by Modernity."⁵

³ The term is derived from the Haitian mythology – *Tonton Macoute* is a bogeyman, who kidnaps children.

⁴ J. Michael Dash, "Fictions of Displacement: Locating Modern Haitian Narratives," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 27 (October 2008), p. 35.

⁵ Dash, "Fictions of Displacement," p. 33.

At the same time, the US neocolonial presence in Haiti ushered in a specifically American concept of nationalism that became the foundation of François Duvalier's totalitarian dictatorship. Duvalier exploited and mirrored the US nationalist ideology that defined itself through political, geographic and ideological distinction. He used his policy of Black Nationalism to unify the country in fear and loathing of the white Dominican Republic that occupies the other part of the island of Hispaniola. He eradicated the mulatto elite and all traditions not appropriate for the new indigenous identity of the nation.

Nonetheless, despite his elevation of the popular folklore and religion, his regime drove thousands Haitians to seek refuge in the US and other countries. Those who remained in Haiti were subjected to what Lucas calls "the process of zombification,"⁶ that is "a mechanism of debasement through dehumanization."⁷ It was "a mixture of generalized corruption and terror" whose aim was to break any resistance, to "[annihilate] any impulse of redemptive revolt."⁸ Tortures were the main weapon to subjugate Haitians into submission, to turn them into the living dead deprived of the self, human dignity and freedom. They were often directed at "the destruction of individual personality and its transformation into a human wreck attempting to *déchirer* – in Creole, the term has the meaning of utterly destroying, wiping out, breaking apart – [the tortures were to lacerate] the ontological tissue in order to reduce it to shreds."⁹ Thus Lucas's use of the term "zombie" goes beyond the commonplace denotation of "zombie" as "a living dead" brought back to life through "voodoo" sorcery. Zombification, in the sense that Lucas uses it, is "the stigmata of degradation [imprinted] upon the entire Haitian world."¹⁰

Danticat's short stories offer a few glimpses of the acts of genocide committed by *Toton Macoutes*. Only one story shows the extent of their transgressions against their fellow countrymen. That story presents the fate of an activity priest, who bravely opposed the regime through his rebellious sermons. He knows that his sermons, which he calls "sermons to the beast,"¹¹ delivered in the church and on the radio, will inevitably lead to his incarceration. Still he tenaciously insists on following his personal creed of a gladiator according to which "life was neither something you defended by hiding, nor surrendered calmly to other people's terms."¹²

⁶ Rafaël Lucas, "The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature," *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 35, no. 2 (summer 2004), p. 56.

⁷ Lucas, "The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature," p. 57.

⁸ Lucas, "The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature," p. 56.

⁹ Lucas, "The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature," p. 57.

¹⁰ Lucas, "The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature," p. 56.

¹¹ Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 227.

¹² Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 201.

When the preacher is imprisoned and drugged into *Toton Macoutes'* barracks, he fully realizes the painful truth about the state apparatus of systematic dehumanization through torture:

He felt as though he was shedding skin, shedding voice, shedding sight, shedding everything he'd tried so hard to make himself into, a well-dressed man, a well-spoken man, a well-read man. He was leaving it all behind now with bits of his flesh on the ground, morsel by morsel being scrapped off by pebbles, rocks, tiny bottle shards and cracks in the concrete.¹³

In the prison he encounters other prisoners who had languished there for years. These prisoners with “skeletal frames and festering sores” are likened to zombies: “many of them were forgotten by the world outside given up for dead. For indeed they had died! They were being destroyed piece by piece, day by day, disappearing like the flesh from their bones.”¹⁴ The preacher, who had dreamed about a glorious death and resurrection, does not want to be caught like them “in the squalid limbo between life and death.”¹⁵ Instead of this “prolonged suffering” that in due course of time can turn any human being into zombie, he chooses a quick death by attacking his tormentor. He dies a hero's death, unlike other prisoners, turned into the living dead by physical and psychological ordeals.

Other characters from Danticat's collection choose exile and diaspora in an attempt to save their lives. Beatrice the protagonist of the story “The Bridal Seamstress” survived tortures inflicted on her by the same *Toton Macoute*, who arrested her for her refusal to dance with him. Presently she lives in New York where she has made a career as a bridal seamstress. Though she is safe she finds it difficult to put her traumatic past behind. She is transfixed by the thought that her torturer as well found a refuge in the New York Little Haiti. She is interviewed by a young Haitian-American journalist Aline, who makes sure that it is not true, and who is shocked to realize “that people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives.”¹⁶ Beatrice is like a terrified infant in a cruel experiment that Aline remembers from her psychology class. The infant was made “to crawl on the glass surface with the image of a gorge

¹³ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 213.

¹⁴ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 225.

¹⁵ The choice of the word limbo, meaning a kind of dance performed by slaves during the Middle Passage is not accidental, as it brings to mind slavery which, according to Lucas, was the first successful attempt at zombification of black people. See Lucas, “The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature,” p. 63.

¹⁶ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 137.

below.”¹⁷ Just as the infant cringes from a danger that is not really there, so Beatrice is scared of a prospect of running again into the man who in the past tortured her.

Many characters in this collection are haunted like Beatrice by this phantom who eventually turns out to be a flesh-and-blood person – he is Mr. Bienaime, the main protagonist of the collection, a former prison guard and torturer under the Duvalier’s regime, one of the famous *choukèt lawoze* i.e. dew breakers who used to “come before the dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they’d take you away.”¹⁸ In the words of Sierra Prasada Millman’s “he is the man who has raped, imprisoned, and murdered the women of Danticat’s five books, has stolen her lovers from each other and children from their parents, has forced her varied protagonists into what may be a permanent exile.”¹⁹

The central theme of the book is “the puzzle of his identity” – the split between two conflicted persona – that of the torturer in Duvalier’s regime and a hard working barber and good and loving family man living in Haiti’s tenth department in New York. The book dramatizes the possibility and plausibility of such a radical transformation, through testimonies provided by Mr. Bienaime’s victims such as Beatrice; victims who are unable to put an end to their mental torture. Their descriptions of Mr. Bienaime’s hideous crimes, scattered throughout the book, foreground his sadism and the evident relish with which he performed his duties as *Toton Macoute*. From their accounts Mr. Bienaime emerges not a loving and “beloved” father²⁰ but as an angel of death and a wanton sadist.

Yet the strength of this book comes from the fact that Danticat does not refuse Mr. Bienaime his humanity. Just as Mr. Bienaime’s wife and daughter learn to love him before they find out about his secrets, so readers learn to appreciate his humanity and his suffering evidenced by his violent nightmares that plunge him into the darkness of his past and send him rolling off his bed at night, before they know the full extent of his sins. We not only see how the blows Mr. Bienaime “has rained down on others continue to fall on his own head,”²¹ but also how, in a sense, he is both a hunter and a prey. Danticat is very careful not to put Mr. Bienaime’s suffering on a par with his victims,⁷ but it is the triumph of the novel that it manages to convince

¹⁷ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 130.

¹⁸ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 131.

¹⁹ Sierra Prasada Millman, “Far from Heaven, Far from Home,” *In The Fray Magazine*. n.d, accessed December 12, 2009, http://inthefrey.org/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=397&cpop. Page numbers were not provided.

²⁰ “Bienaime” in French means “well-loved,” the name is only seemingly ironic because Mr. Bienaime’s wife and daughter dote on him.

²¹ Sierra Prasada Millman, “Far from Heaven, Far from Home.”

a reader that, Mr. Bienaime is also a victim of the totalitarian state of Haiti and its terror producing machinery. He can be seen as a product of an entropic, violence-prone postcolonial society that Lucas associates with moral bankruptcy, chronic corruption and obscurantism.

The American occupation of Haiti not only taught Haitians how to build prisons but also extended the scope of state-targeted individuals. In the words of Walcott-Hackshaw “these individuals included children, the elderly, and families of suspected political adversaries; [Duvalier’s regime] eliminated the gender distinction that had ensured preferential treatment for women; it disregarded rank and status in civil society; and it used violence against groups that could not be defined in political terms such as villages and sports teams.”²² Mr. Bienaime, as it turns out, is one of such “targeted” individuals. He is one of Haiti’s displaced peasants who, due to Duvalier’s state-sanctioned corruption, lost his only inheritance – the land which was a symbol of his family rise in social status. As his land is taken over by the *Toton Macoutes*, he turns from the son of landowning farmers into a vulnerable orphan who internalizes the violence wreaked against his family and responds with more violence, indulging his worst impulses. To compensate for the lack of family, land and liberty, he turns his fear and impotence into self-empowerment by joining the ranks of the very people who dispossessed him. However, in the process he loses his soul thus becoming what Lucas might call “a character bloated with Ubuesque totalitarianism” – “a desacralized, laicized, banalized incarnation of the zombie.”²³

In this way, through the character of Mr. Bienaime, Danticat interrogates the working of the terrorist state. She demonstrates that in Duvalier’s totalitarian regime no individual could remain outside the culture of terror and zombification. Most importantly she shows how the process of zombification, meant to tear apart the victims, first and foremost, dehumanized the perpetrators. Mr. Bienaime is a zombie par excellence – he is, to misquote Lucas again, “the *creature* [...] of the will to power,” “[an] archetypal figure of failure.”²⁴ He is a madman “pushed outside the ranks of normalcy by certain endemic calamities of Haitian history.” As a zombie, he is “a figure of decline,” one that “brings together the signifiers of failure.”²⁵ He perpetuates the vicious

²² Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, “My Love is Like a Rose: Terror, *Territoire*, and the poetics of Marie Chauvet,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 18 (September 2005), p. 43.

²³ Lucas, “The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature,” pp. 57, 66.

The adjective “ubuesque” is an allusion to a nineteenth-century French play *Ubu Roy* by Alfred Jarry, a forerunner of the Theater of the Absurd. The play is a satire on grotesque power and greedy self gratification. Its titular protagonist is in many ways similar to Bienaime before his transformation: fat, ugly, gluttonous, cruel, and evil.

²⁴ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 65.

²⁵ Lucas, “The Aesthetics of Degradation in Haitian Literature,” p. 66.

circle of Haitian history, which is said to be cyclical as it perpetually returns to the starting point repeating again and again its unspeakable horrors. He is a spectral phantom – an embodiment of the nation suspended, as Fanon might put it, in a condition of negativity, in which the narcissistic pattern of aggression is unleashed on the postcolonial people themselves. Through Mr. Bienaime's hands Haiti is committing acts of violation against itself, against its own people, zombifying them through the deprivation of the self, human dignity and liberty and turning them either into hunters or prey.

Danticat's cycle shows how Mr. Bienaime, who has never revealed the truth about his past to anyone but his wife and daughter, has turned into a tired ghost caught in the liminality between life and death. He blights the lives of his family with death and decay, as his hidden guilt not only cuts them off from the country of their birth but also alienates them from the Haitian community of New York. Therefore another important theme of the collection is how the dead weight of the past affects the people in the present. It shows what effect his murky past has had on his family. So there is the story of Anne, a half-sister of her husband's last victim – the preacher, who believes in miracles and considers her husband's transformation as one of them; and there is the story of Ka, his daughter – a young woman aspiring to be an artist – who learns about her father's secret in the opening story "The Book of the Dead."

In this story the father and the daughter are traveling to Tampa to deliver Ka's first successful sculpture to Gabrielle Fonteneau – a Haitian American film star who is "an avid art collector."²⁶ The sculpture presents Ka's visualization of her father, as a prisoner of the Duvalier's regime. It is made of "the piece of mahogany naturally flawed" – it has superficial cracks on its back that remind Ka of the scar on his father's face which she believes to be a mark of torture. It betrays her desire to belong to the Haitian nation, to forge a connection to her parents' homeland. It is a connection that her parents so far have failed to provide, as they live a reclusive and secretive life, dreading that one day the truth about their past may come to light.

As Ka's parents have been unwilling to share with her any of their recollections of Haiti, Ka's knowledge of it is based on television, newspapers and books which put forward a stereotyped picture of Haiti. It is either portrayed as a country of discrimination, oppression and despotism, in which ordinary Haitians, like her father, must put up a heroic fight; or as a country afflicted by poverty, corruption, Aids and "voodoo." When faced with these clichés, the former perpetuated by Haitian immigrants, the latter by the American media, Ka opts for the first one, seeing victimization and martyrdom as the founding experience of Haitian expatriates and the Haitian nation.

²⁶ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 7.

In order to construct her nation-based identity, Ka creates art that is a nostalgic reconfiguration of the past – it is based on a static and fixed definition of home, identity and nation. She is entrapped in the mythology and rhetoric of nationalism that celebrates cultural rootedness and collective identification based on one version of historical experience. She conflates national and filial identity and imposes a conventional grid of nationalist ideology – the idealized history of heroes and martyrs – on her father. The sculpture makes the past tangible, and it gives Ka a sense of secure and stable identity. It is an expression of her confidence in her father and of her solidarity with Haiti; finally it is a simplification and beautification of its history.

Gabrielle Fonteneau, the prospective buyer of the sculpture, represents a similar desire “to museumize [the] culture left behind,” to misquote Gayatri Spivak. The sculpture is meant to be another exhibit in Gabrielle Fonteneau’s parents’ house which is tellingly situated on a cul-de-sac and is vaguely reminiscent of a temple, with its living room that “has a cathedral ceiling and walls covered with Haitian paintings with subjects ranging from market scenes and first communions to weddings and wakes.”²⁷ It is a place where the memory of Haiti is not only “museumized” but also worshipped. When Mrs. Fonteneau, Gabrielle’s mother, with words “paints a picture [of Haiti],”²⁸ she becomes “giddy; her voice grows louder and even her daughter is absorbed, smiling and recollecting with her mother.”²⁹ Gabrielle Fonteneau, just like Ka, negotiates her identity through the filial connection. Ka’s sculpture is meant to be a present for Gabrielle’s father, and it fits well into the Fonteneau’s idealized vision of Haiti.

For the Fonteneaus, who are protected by their daughter’s privileged status, Haiti is like a paradise where “the rain is sweeter, the dust is lighter, [the] beaches prettier.”³⁰ The Fonteneaus not only display nostalgia for the past but also an evident relish for the nationalist image of Haiti as Eden. Nothing of the hardship, trauma or lived realities of the Haitians living in Haiti’s numerous shantytowns intrudes upon this ideal, which is not unlike the tropical picturesque promoted not only by national iconography but also Euro-American travel literature. Such images as the ones displayed in the Fonteneau’s house “render as natural the rituals of national life and misrecognize the country through prescribed signs of nationhood.”³¹ For Ka, who has been just made a privy to her father’s secret, this vision and jubilation it induces are hard to

²⁷ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 28.

²⁸ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 29.

²⁹ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 30.

³⁰ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 29.

³¹ Leon Wainwright, “Art, Embodiment, Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography and Framing the Caribbean,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 25 (February 2008), p. 137.

embrace. Therefore, when Mrs. Fonteneau asserts that there is “nothing like sinking your hand in sand from the beach in your own country,” the image that immediately springs to Ka’s mind is of her father “dripping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finding that what he comes up with is a fistful of blood.”³²

“The Book of the Dead” presents the moment at which Ka experiences her identity crisis, when, having learned the truth about her father, she has to move on beyond historical and national narratives that are based on one hegemonic vision of the past and history. As an artist, Ka should be able to negotiate an identity outside the nationalist/historical framework and she should go beyond the artificiality, sterility and rigidity of her vision. Her father’s confession forces her to see through the nostalgic idealization of the past or the present. She also has to start to think about her identity in a new way, without looking at it through the lenses of nationalist ideology.

Yet the story dramatizes the possibility of Ka’s transformation into a fully-fledged artist and a more complete subject. Once her identity is destabilized by her father’s confession, Ka finds it difficult to adjust to the new reality and its far-reaching implications. Throughout the story, Ka is portrayed as a person who feels unsure of herself and is not confident in her capacities as an artist. She considers herself “an obsessive wood carver with a single subject so far – [her] father” and she admits she is not really an artist, “not in the way [she] would like to be.”³³ She is constantly pestered with doubts about the value of her sculpture (“Would the client be satisfied?”³⁴) and is susceptible to other people’s value judgments: “I am not beyond spontaneous fanaticism inspired by famous people, whose breezy declarations seem to carry so much more weight than those of ordinary mortals.”³⁵ Her father’s confession not only shatters her illusions but also reveals her hidden desire to miss out some disconcerting facts about her parents’ life:

Is he going to explain why he and my mother have no close friends, why they’ve never had anyone over in the house, why they never speak of any relatives in Haiti or anywhere else, or have never returned there, or even after I learned Creole from them, have never taught me anything else about the country beyond what I could find out on my own on the television, in newspapers, in books? Is he about to tell me why Manman is so pious? Why she goes to daily Mass?

³² Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 30.

³³ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 4.

³⁴ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 7.

³⁵ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 12.

I am not sure I want to know anything more than the little they've chosen to share with me all these years, but it is clear that he needs to tell me, has been trying to for a long time.³⁶

The story does not show Ka's reconstitution of a coherent sense of the self. Straddled with the inheritance of her father's guilt, Ka becomes a forced accomplice of his crimes. When she is leaving with her father the Fonteneaus' house, she feels as stigmatized as he is. When he rubs his scar, yet another artifact "chiseled and embossed looking,"³⁷ left on his cheek by the preacher, "out of a strange reflex [Ka] scratch[es] her face in the same spot."³⁸ Then as if understanding the reason of this strange reflex, she recollects a passage from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which gave the title to this particular story. The passage called "Driving Back the Slaughters" precisely encapsulates Ka's predicament: "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."³⁹ Ka will remain the prisoner of her father's dark past, an heir to his guilty conscience. She will not reveal her father's secret, which only deepens her sense of fragmentation and isolation, reflected by the silence that sets in between them. Estranged from her parents, who "betrayed" her and deprived of her reveries about Haiti and the nation, Ka will never satisfy her desire to belong because her father has barred her way to all communities she knows, either real or imagined.

Both Ka and Anne are isolated and silenced by the Dew Breaker. Anne is described by her daughter, who, is her father's only judge, as a "thirty-year-plus disciple of [Ka's] father's coercive persuasion."⁴⁰ According to her daughter, Anne is an "echo" of her husband – in speech, actions, even businesses. She does her best to convince herself that her husband's transformation is the greatest miracle of her life. She takes on the role he assigns her, believing herself to be his "ka" – his good angel.⁴¹ Anne's life is built on continuous self deception, sometimes mercilessly exposed by the ironic tone of narration – in Anne's opinion her husband "hadn't been a famous Dew Breaker, or torturer anyway, just one of the humans who had done their jobs so well that their victims were never able to speak of them again."⁴² Anne never talks about her half-brother's death with her husband:

³⁶ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 20.

³⁷ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 16.

³⁸ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 32.

³⁹ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 2.

⁴¹ In Egyptian mythology "Ka" is a kind of soul that guides the deceased person through the underworld.

⁴² Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 77.

After the daughter was born, she and her husband would talk about her brother. But only briefly. He referring to “his last prisoner,” the one that scarred his face, and she to “my stepbrother, the famous preacher,” neither of them venturing beyond these coded utterances, dreading the day when someone other than themselves would more fully convene the two halves of the same person. He endorsed the public story, the one that the preacher had killed himself. And she accepted that he had only arrested him and turned him over to someone else. Neither believing the other nor themselves. But never delving too far back in time, beyond the night they met. She was too busy concentrating on and revising who she was now, and who she wanted to become.⁴³

Thus Anne can be seen as a diasporic subject, who, is more interested in “becoming” than in the reckoning of the past. Her new sense of the self is achieved at the easy price of cutting herself from the past, erasing her brother from memory and attending a daily Mass.

Even though Anne would like to believe that “atonement, reparation, was possible and available to everyone,”⁴⁴ her life is full of remorse – it is “a pendulum between forgiveness and regret.”⁴⁵ She yearns for peace she is never allowed to experience, “acknowledging of kinship of shame and guilt she had inherited from her husband.”⁴⁶ The pendulum is finally stopped by her daughter, and the ultimate price Anne pays for her self-deception is her daughter’s trust and love. In the opening story, Ka hangs on her mother in the mid-conversation, when she realizes that her mother is a bearer of the same shameful past as her father. It is only on the last page of the collection that the reader finds out what happens at the other end of the line. The silence that engulfs Anne makes her acutely aware of “this particular type loneliness, this feeling that you could be alive or dead and none would know.”⁴⁷ There are many things she wishes to say to her daughter, but the damage has already been done: “the daughter was already gone, lost, accidentally or purposely, in the hum of the dial tone.”⁴⁸ Now that the past catches up with Anne, she realizes “there is no way to stop this dread anymore, [...] this fright that the most important relationships in her life were always on the verge of being severed or lost [...]”⁴⁹ The “benevolent collaboration, a conspirational

⁴³ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 241.

⁴⁴ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 142.

⁴⁵ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 242.

⁴⁸ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 244.

⁴⁹ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 242.

friendship”⁵⁰ with her husband ultimately brings Anne on the brink of disintegration – her muttering to the receiver, in which she can no longer hear her daughter’s voice, represents her shattered world broken to pieces by the Mephistophelian pact with her husband. She becomes a zombie-like phantom, contaminated with evil and reduced to being an “echo” of her husband, his “ka,” “his [mask] against his own face.”⁵¹

Danticat delineates the paths to renewal, and rebirth, which many of her characters dream about but so few actually take. These paths always lead individuals back to their communities, not away from them. The ethical framework of some of the stories seems to suggest that these communities could forgive Mr. Bienaime and help him to solve the puzzle of his hunter-and-prey identity. But Mr. Bienaime is not ready to take such a path, becoming instead, to use Alison Donnell’s expression, a traveler, “an independent center of gravity, gathering experiences and possessions.”⁵² By cutting his ties with Haiti and becoming a member of a diasporic community, he hides his dishonourable secret and elides responsibility. Mobility, migrancy and diaspora make it possible for him to formulate an autonomous and empowering agency, contingent only on his daughter’s forgiveness.

It is my argument that the fiction of Edwidge Danticat, the life-long chronicler of Haitian immigrants’ experience, inserts in this way an important caveat in the idealistic conceptualization of diaspora and migrancy. Her bi-local collection of short stories *The Dew Breaker* demonstrates that not for all diasporic subjects emigration was a choice, for most it was a necessity, while for some it was an opportunity “to step back from [their] moral commitments,”⁵³ to use David Scott’s words. *The Dew Breaker* refuses to unproblematically embrace the liberatory rhetoric of postnationalism that fashions migrancy as a prerequisite of freedom and presents “diaspora as a utopian antidote, or corrective measure, to homeland politics.”⁵⁴ It reminds the reader that “[...] violent, repressive criminals often escape punishment for their crimes against humanity *in diaspora*, even as thousands of destitute and victimized Haitians fleeing violence on small boats and crossing the Atlantic are routinely intercepted, detained, and deported in effect turned away from [the American] shores.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 240.

⁵¹ Danticat, *The Dew Breaker*, p. 34.

⁵² Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*, p. 98.

⁵³ David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, (Princeton, NJ): Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 154.

⁵⁴ Jana Evans Braziel, “Diasporic Disciplining of Caliban? Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Intra-Caribbean Politics,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 26 (June 2008), p. 150.

⁵⁵ Evans Braziel, “Diasporic Disciplining of Caliban?,” p. 159.

Danticat's relentless scrutiny of national and diasporic problematic shows that both places – Haiti and its Tenth Department in the US – can be tainted with evil. Diaspora might be a revolt against the nation state, as Michael Hanchard claims,⁵⁶ but in Danticat's collection we are constantly reminded that “diasporic formations [...] often violently reproduce and re-inscribe the divisions of home and homeland.”⁵⁷ As Evans Braziel contends, diasporas “are fractured landscapes,” as “not only oppressed but also corrupt presidents and even petty but violent Calibans are part of out-migratory waves that constitute diasporic formation abroad.”⁵⁸ *The Dew Breaker* presents such a fractured landscape in which petty zombies infiltrate American Little Haiti. Consequently there is a great deal of ambivalence towards the moral aspect of diasporic identity formation.

Though Danticat rethinks the idea of Haitianness in a globalized context, as Dash argues, her writing should not be exclusively “seen in terms of the uniform postcolonial experience of nomadism and hybridity. It has much more to do with writing back to exclusionary ideas of difference in Haitian thought, and re-sitting of Haitian narrative in a new relational space.”⁵⁹ Danticat undoes the myth of Haiti as a paradise. *The Dew Breaker* is as much about mobility, hybridity and diaspora as about some misconceptions of national mythology which “appropriated rural landscapes as sites of cultural authenticity and national identity.”⁶⁰ It is also a novel about Haitian history in which the state is constantly posed against the nation. The theme of zombification becomes a construction through which, Danticat's collection enters the new reconfigured novelistic universe, new system of Haitian aesthetics, which Lucas calls “The Aesthetics of Degradation,”⁶¹ in which the enchantment with Nature is gone and the degradation of the spirit becomes the major subject matter. *The Dew Breaker* can be seen as one of the contemporary Haitian apocalyptic narratives whose “tableaux [...] signal definite inadmissibility of

⁵⁶ Michael Hanchard. “Identity, Meaning and the African American,” *Social Text*, vol. 24 (1990), p. 40.

⁵⁷ Jana Evans Braziel, “Diasporic Disciplining of Caliban? Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Intra-Caribbean Politics,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol. 26 (June 2008), p. 154.

⁵⁸ Jana Evans Braziel, “Diasporic Disciplining of Caliban?,” p. 149.

⁵⁹ Dash, “Fictions of Displacements,” p. 41.

⁶⁰ Dash, “Fictions of Displacements,” p. 38.

⁶¹ Other formal aspects of the aesthetics of degradation according to Lucas are: fragmentation i.e. the form of short stories reflecting “the perception of the country broken into thousands of pieces” and different from “the broad frescoes of magical realism” (pp. 71–72); new focus on urban settings which are “concentration and amplification of the defects of Haitian society,” “a gigantic space of debasement,” “whose basic characteristic is filth” (p. 70); replacement of Promethean heroes from the earlier magical realist fiction with anti-heroes or collective heroes – “change is often borne by collectivity [...] or by women figures” (p. 72).

any euphoric discourse of national identity ([...] ‘dear Haiti,’ [...] ‘the pearl of the Antilles;’ ‘the first black republic;’ ‘the cradle of Negritude’).⁶²

⁶² Lucas, “The Aesthetics of Degradation,” p. 72.

Izabella Penier

**Czarnoatlantycki zombie:
nacjonalistyczne schizmy i utopijne diaspory
w książce Edwidge Danticat *The Dew Breaker***

Streszczenie

Tematem artykułu jest analiza zbioru opowiadań *The Dew Breaker* autorstwa afro-karaibskiej pisarki Edwidge Danticat, która jest powszechnie uważana za rzeczniczkę haitańskiej diaspory w USA. Książka Danticat przedstawia terror i traumę wywołane przez represyjny i brutalny reżim haitańskiego dyktatora „Papy Doca” Duvaliera, który rządził krajem w latach 1957–1971. Artykuł sytuuje cykl opowiadań Danticat we współczesnej haitańskiej konwencji literackiej określanej mianem „estetyki degradacji”, której najbardziej wyrazistym tropem jest sylwetka kata-szaleńca, posiadającego cechy znanego z haitańskiego folkloru zombie. Artykuł opisuje sposób, w jaki Danticat przedstawia proces „zombifikacji”, jako metaforę mechanizmu działania państwa policyjnego, które dehumanizuje swoich obywateli, pozbawiając ich wolnej woli i obracając w „żywe trupy”. Artykuł rozważa również strategie odrodzenia się społeczeństwa Haiti, jakie ukazuje w swoim zbiorze Danticat, która pomimo swego statusu pisarki diasporycznej nie wpisuje się w modny wśród postkolonialnych krytyków dyskurs trans-nacjonalizmu.

Izabella Penier

**Schwarz-atlantischer Zombie:
nationalistische Schismen und utopische Diasporen
in Edwidge Danticats Buch *The Dew Breaker***

Zusammenfassung

In ihrem Essay analysiert die Verfasserin die Sammlung von Erzählungen der afro-karaibischen Schriftstellerin, Edwidge Danticat, die für eine Fürsprecherin der haitischen Diaspora in den USA allgemein gehalten ist. Danticats Buch stellt die durch repressive und brutale Regime des haitischen Diktators, „Papa Doc“ Duvalier (1957–1971) hervorgerufenen Terror und Trauma dar. Die Erzählungsreihe gehört der in gegenwärtiger haitischer Literatur auftretenden Konvention „Ästhetik des Abstiegs“, deren besonderes Merkmal die Gestalt eines verrückten Henkers, des in haitischer Folklore bekannten Zombies, ist. Die Verfasserin zeigt, auf welche Art und Weise Danticat die „Zombifizierung“ schildert; der Prozess ist hier

eine Metapher für die Tätigkeit des Polizeistaates, der seine Bürger entmenschlicht, indem er ihnen freien Willen wegnimmt und sie in „lebende Leiche“ verwandelt. In ihren Erzählungen lässt Danticat erscheinen, mit Hilfe welcher Strategien sich die haitische Gesellschaft zu erneuern versucht. Obwohl Edwidge Danticat den Status einer Diaspora-Schriftstellerin hat, versucht sie jedoch nicht, sich in den heutzutage unter den postkolonialen Kritikern populären transnationalistischen Diskurs hineinzupassen.