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Playing God: Legacies of Narrative Control in Danticat and Walker

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Playing God: Legacies of Narrative Control in Danticat and Walker

In *The Dew Breaker* by Edwidge Danticat and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

characters experience and manifest power through the production of narrative, naming and labeling, and bodily interactions. Abusers such as the Dew Breaker, Duvalier, and Alphonso understand power as hierarchical, gained at the expense of others. These men commit acts of physical violence, spin scapegoat narratives which justify torture and rape, and attempt to name reality and define morality for their victims; in short, they pursue the power of a god to assert hegemony and control others. Scholars such as Bellamy suggest that the Dew Breaker is a changed man after giving up occupational torture and starting a family in America. However, close examination of his interactions with Anne and Ka demonstrates that he continues to exert control over others through acts of physical violence and the narcissistic, possessive act of naming his daughter as an extension of himself. Mr. Bienamé is no longer a Tonton Macoute, but exhibits the same need for control and self-deifying narrative which undergirded his career as a torturer. Danticat and Walker address unrepentant abusers like the Dew Breaker not through communal action which brings perpetrators to justice, but by focusing on the stories and growth of victims. They provide examples of women who understand power as productive, reciprocally gained through enabling others to possess agency over their own stories and identity. Squeak, Shug Avery and Celie, and Freda respectively self-name and label to gain personal agency, relinquish personal control through bodily acts of love, and share narratives which recontextualize trauma. They become better able to love themselves and others because they enter into relationships.

Danticat and Walker acknowledge deeply misogynistic patterns of behavior in their work but they do not reduce to a male–bad, female–good binary. Mr. Bienamé, ‘Papa Doc’ Duvalier, Alphonso, and Albert, the male father figures, are mainly responsible for the perpetuation of violence and spinning narratives which control and subjugate women. Maleness and violence are inextricably linked. However, Danticat and Walker interrogate the fundamental nature of power and recognize that while men are often responsible for brute violence against women to enforce patriarchal norms, there are exceptions to this dynamic. They break the binary of male as perpetrator and female as victim: we see female torturers like Rosalie, male victims like the Preacher, and women who have the power to rename reality like Shug. Danticat and Walker write complex stories in which men not only wreak violence but also spin empowering narratives. These authors seek a resolution which is not male–exclusive, but that calls humanity to be truth–tellers and to empower others. In doing so, they challenge any feminism which would merely flip the hierarchy and empower women at the expense of men. Rather, together these authors articulate a nuanced position that is more than pro–female. Without backing away from the reality of patriarchal hierarchies, these authors advocate for a world in which, without denying or forgetting trauma, both sexes can mutually empower through personal agency over identity and valuing the stories of others.

***The Dew Breaker* and *The Color Purple*: Why Place Them in Conversation?**

Critics rarely place Danticat and Walker together, not least because the two wrote very different books. Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* is a short story cycle that explores the strengths and traumas of the Haitian–American diaspora, with a focus on the character of Mr. Bienamé, a former torturer. *The Color Purple* is work of feminist epistolary fiction that focuses on Celie’s life in the rural American South during the 1930’s and how she overcomes sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. The two books are undeniably different in tone.

Additionally, *The Color Purple* is a more open narrative; it is told from a first-person perspective, and Celie originally writes to God, a divine being to whom she should have no reason to lie. As readers, we are often privy to Celie's emotions, thoughts, and perceptions of the world. *The Dew Breaker*, on the other hand, often shrouds the way the characters feel. Written in third-person, the root of the trauma is slippery, and there are many silences. Each time we as readers think we have an understanding of the nature of the trauma inflicted and experienced by a full cast of characters, it becomes more complex. Walker begins with the trauma of Celie's abuse and rape as a child by her stepfather. At the end of the book, when Celie makes peace with her abusive former husband and reunites with her sister and children, Walker gives us a sweeping vision of feminist reconciliation. Danticat, however, begins with the American dream, opening with an immigrant story of a couple who have started their own business, learned English, and raised a daughter who is college-educated and an artist. Yet, the reader comes to learn, they are also the American nightmare, hiding dark secrets of torture and death. Danticat laces moments of empowerment throughout *The Dew Breaker* but she ends, not with the resolution of decade-spanning trauma, but with an explicit portrayal of The Dew Breaker's work as a state torturer in Haiti during the Duvalier dictatorship. *The Dew Breaker* ends where *The Color Purple* begins; through this inverse parallel the two enter into conversation.

Despite more than 20 years difference in publication year, Danticat and Walker make the same argument about power and how we possess it. This decade-spanning solidarity of vision lends authority to their argument. In both works, the male abusers who proliferate violence assert control through narrative manipulation which is primarily religious in nature. They justify their own violence through scapegoating the victim, spinning a narrative in which the victim both suffers abuse and is responsible for the weight of the perpetrator's moral degradation. It is significant that, despite writing over two decades apart, the deep logic

and implicit understanding of the power hierarchy in Danticat and Walker's works is fundamentally the same. Both authors come to similar conclusions about the nature of power and their solutions to the abuse of power – truth-telling, speaking trauma aloud, and human connection – resonate in resounding unison. The problem has not changed, nor has the solution. As such, reading Danticat and Walker in conversation with one another is beneficial as, together, they provide a more comprehensive range of resistance to violent patriarchy.

A Study of Power

The Dew Breaker, Alphonso and Duvalier have control – the ability to impose their will in the world – over their victims. They obtain this control through religious and scapegoating narratives, naming and labeling, and violent bodily interaction. Abusive power is the combination of narrative and force by which control over others is achieved. The Dew Breaker and Alphonso in particular, acquire power through physical acts of violence. However, they do not believe that violence is, in and of itself, good. For these characters, the need to be in control is at odds with the need to consider themselves morally acceptable. Thus the Dew Breaker and Alphonso spin narratives and stories labeling their victims as evil to justify the control they acquire through violence. They also exert narratives of religious control, manipulating their victims' understanding of God. Through narratives of self-deification they construe events so that their victims perceive themselves as morally ambiguous and accept these men as possessing unlimited, god-like power. Duvalier, the Dew Breaker and Alphonso tap into authority inherent in the concept of God the father to achieve near-complete control over their victims. In Connell's work, *Gender and Power* he writes about the connection between masculinity and authority. "If authority is defined as legitimate power, then we can say that the main axis of the power structure of gender is the general connection of authority with masculinity" (109). God is the all-powerful head of the hierarchy. His authority is legitimate because his all-seeing power cannot be resisted or

denied. The power inherent in a masculine god is also present in the role of father, as by traditional definitions a father possesses legitimate authority over his family. Through this connection with God the father, abusers are able to create a hierarchy of control with themselves at the top. Through establishing the particular ways in which these men demonstrate control over their victims in specific interactions, it is possible to understand the nature of the power that they possess.

Physical violence bookends and permeates Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*. The character of the Dew Breaker is a Tonton Macoute, a Haitian–American who works as a state–sanctioned torturer for the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti before moving to America. The Dew Breaker holds a vast amount of power. In the final short story detailing his last days in Haiti, Danticat depicts a few of the innumerable atrocities that he commits. This is a man who earned a “lofty reputation” among his colleagues for brutality (197):

He was the one who came up with the most physically and psychological taxing trials for the prisoners in his block . . . He liked to paddle them with braided cowhide, stand on their cracking backs and jump up and down like a drunk on a trampoline, pound a rock on the protruding bone behind their earlobes until they couldn't hear the orders he was shouting at them, tie blocks of concrete to the end of sisal ropes and balance them off their testicles if they were men or their breasts if they were women (Danticat 198–99).

The ability to perpetuate violence is a mechanism of control. The physical capacity to make another unwillingly experience pain constitutes one facet of the way in which an individual holds power over another. A fundamental attribute of power is brute force – the ability to physically enact your will on another body, individual, or group. The Dew Breaker has the physical ability and will to torture. He is a large man who extorts meals from restaurants “because he enjoyed watching his body grow wider and meatier just as his sense of power

did” (196). Oftentimes he is physically stronger than his emaciated victims who may have spent months in prison. He also carries a pistol which further expedites his ability to commit the violent act of murder. This type of torturous violence in *The Dew Breaker* is primarily, although not exclusively, perpetuated by males. In his work *Gender and Power*, Connell notes a connection between maleness and violence as a form of social power: “Force is one important component [of the multiple character of social power]. It is no accident that the means of organized violence – weapons and knowledge of military technique – are almost entirely in the hands of men” (107). Throughout *The Dew Breaker*, organized violence and individual acts of torture carried out by the Tonton Macoute are normally perpetrated by men. This violence is part of how one holds power in society, leaving women vulnerable since they are less physically able to gain this type of power. Furthermore, it is not only the actual physical violence, but also the threat of this violence which is empowering to men. The Dew Breaker has power merely because he has the physical capacity to torture and the reputation for doing so. Restaurant owners will fearfully provide free meals because of his potential for violence. As such, violence does not necessarily have to be executed or performed every time in order to be powerful. The knowledge of military or torture technique and a history of violence is enough to hold social power and exert control.

Similarly to the Dew Breaker’s use of violence as a mechanism of control, Celie’s stepfather Alphonso also uses physical violence to maintain control over the women in his life. He does not exert control over an entire community, but within the microcosm of the familial relationship. On the first page of *The Color Purple*, his violence is enacted through the rape of his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter: “[He] say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it” (Walker 1). Sexual violence is a

bodily display of power on the part of Alphonso. As a full-grown male, he is physically stronger than Celie, and this leaves her helpless. Alphonso can overpower Celie physically, rape, and choke her when she cries - even to death if he so wills. In her work *Deadly Innocence* West articulates that instances of rape are the “fundamental mechanism by which men establish and maintain control over women” (54). Much like The Dew Breaker gains control through a reputation for violence, men gain control over women through the reputation of rape. Despite the fact that most men would not commit rape, “they benefit from the position of power established for all men by the rape threatened and committed by the few” (54). By committing an act of physical, bodily violence, Alphonso wields control over Celie. Through this individual act, he partakes in and perpetuates force as an element of social power from which men benefit. Celie’s rape is not an anomaly. Rather, it is the inevitable manifestation of a system which validates Alphonso’s use of his body as a weapon, an implement of torture much the same as the Dew Breaker.

In *The Dew Breaker* and *The Color Purple*, perpetrators such as Alphonso and the Dew Breaker do not believe violence is inherently good. Rather, these men spin narratives which justify violence and validate the ethics of their actions. When he is tasked with murdering the preacher, a political dissident, the Dew Breaker tells himself a story: “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” (Danticat 188). This narrative, which positions the Dew Breaker as the savior of Bel-Air, is identifiable as fiction by the words “he could tell himself” (188). This phrase demonstrates that he is spinning a fictional version of reality because one does not need to convince themselves of truth. The Dew Breaker warps reality to portray himself as misunderstood hero and justify murder. He

has the power to craft a narrative which frames the killing of the political trouble-maker as a necessary evil. The Dew Breaker convinces himself that he is liberator of Bel-Air, freeing the brainwashed from propaganda. Surely this act of heroism to save the public from their own misinformed indoctrination, justifies the murder of their leader. His hero narrative justifies the violence. This justification also demonstrates that the Dew Breaker does not hold an ideology where violence is inherently good. Rather, the bad action must be actively contextualized in order to maintain his own morality. Although functioning in similar ways, narrative and ideology are not precisely the same. In his work *Studying Men and Masculinities*, Buchbinder defines ideology: “ideology develops out of the reality of the people’s relation to the social: to social classes, their dynamics and relationship to one another . . . However, at the same time, ideology overlays and masks that relation so that contradictions, inconsistencies, and inequities are smoothed over and naturalized” (34). A crucial difference between ideology and narrative is that one does not choose their ideologies, or unquestioned presuppositions of what constitutes normal; whereas narrative is an actively created story that one actively decides to believe. The Dew Breaker makes sense of his own violence within a narrative framework that he has constructed. He does not tell himself an ideology; rather, he “easily convinced himself” of the preacher’s violence, and liked to “work on people . . . around whom he could create all sorts of evil tales” (Danticat 187). The Dew Breaker knows that he creates stories. This is not the same thing as an underlying norm in the culture, which most people accept as reality. Instead, the stories he tells are explicit manipulations of his own narrative in order to justify violence. The narrative is a fiction – and he is aware of that – but it is a useful one. The creation of these stories can be understood as an admission that the Dew Breaker knows what he is doing is wrong. If he truly believed that torture was justified he would not have to tell himself a justifying narrative.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie's stepfather also spins a narrative which justifies violence. Similarly to the Dew Breaker, Alphonso also tells stories about his victim in order to absolve himself of guilt. This is particularly evident when he names Celie as evil. Soon after Alphonso rapes her, Celie writes: "He act like he can't stand me no more. Say I'm evil an always up to no good" (Walker 3). By spinning a narrative which paints Celie as evil, Alphonso justifies the serial rape of his stepdaughter. To his mind, evil merits abhorrence and it does not overmuch matter if one rapes an evil person - they deserve pain. We are not provided direct access to the story in Alphonso's head as *The Color Purple* is narrated from Celie's perspective. Still, through analyzing his words and actions, it is possible to extrapolate that Alphonso's narrative is composed for the purposes of self-justification. This establishment of guilt on the part of the victim is an example of what West names as scapegoating: "Scapegoating . . . is the means by which an individual or weaker section of the group can be made to 'carry away' the guilty weight of the community's self-destructive violence. It is the price that must be paid, by someone other than ourselves, for preserving our self-image of spiritual or ideological purity" (54). Scapegoating allows abusers like the Dew Breaker and Alphonso to maintain a self-image of purity, as their victims are assigned blame which justifies violent action. Scapegoating narratives focus on the creation of deficiencies in the character of the victim rather than recognizing any moral deficit in the actions of the perpetrator. Alphonso exerts scapegoating control over Celie when he commands her to remain silent about his abuse, stating that if she exposes him, "*It'd kill your mammy*" (Walker 1). Through this mandate, Alphonso creates a narrative of guilt for his victim in order to preserve his own purity. His scapegoating narrative is powerful in its logical inevitability; if Celie were to tell her mother about the rape, Celie's mother would be emotionally devastated. The act of telling is what would make her devastated. Celie has control over the telling of it, therefore the mother's devastation would be her fault. Celie becomes the guilty party for

selfishly talking about something that she knows will upset her mother. Thus to preserve her own morality, she must stay quiet. This is the understanding of the situation that her stepfather implicitly presents through his command not to speak of the rape. The reality, of course, is that he is using Celie as a scapegoat for his own purity – and it is effective. Celie takes on this story and absorbs it into her own understanding of herself. In the opening lines of *The Color Purple*, we are thrust into the world of Celie’s morality. “Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). The opening two lines of *The Color Purple* are of immense significance in setting the scene for the novel. We learn that Celie is fourteen years old, that she is writing to God, and no longer ‘is’ but used to be a good girl. She begins to write “I am a good girl” but crosses out the “I am” and uses the present perfect “I have been” (1). The present perfect tense is grammatically ambiguous, implying that her goodness could be ended at the time of writing, or continue on into the present. Thus at the beginning of the book, her innate ethical goodness is not a certain thing, and Alphonso’s scapegoating narrative is directly responsible for this.

Similarly to Alphonso’s ability to define Celie’s morality, Haitian dictator François Duvalier utilized a narrative of self–deification to redefine right and wrong for an entire nation. In her work “Papa’s Masks” Joan Conwell talks about “Papa Doc” Duvalier, and the ways in which he held power in Haiti. She notes that Duvalier “succeeded in apotheosizing himself to the point of self–deification . . . it was by using religion that he secured his self–appointed role as familial and spiritual “father” of Haiti, rendering his power near limitless” (3). Duvalier spun a narrative of his own godhood, supported by a regime of terror and violent enforcement. He infiltrated the hearts and minds of the people, calling on the authority inherent in the term father by naming himself “Papa Doc.” In doing so, he evokes the omnipotent headship of God the father. In her article “Hiding and Exposing Violence”

Fuchs writes: “Doubly euphemized as a doctor and a father, François Duvalier regarded himself as the father of the nation” (56). In “Papa’s Masks” Conwell further qualifies this paternal naming by noting “Duvalier is not only father, but “Father” with a capital “F,” public arbiter of life and death” (221). A key attribute of God that Duvalier accesses is the all-seeing ability to observe people’s souls and to name them as guilty. If people believe the narrative, they will capitulate to ‘God’s’ definition of morality and begin to self-correct online the lines of the father’s will. This is power that goes far deeper than violence ever can. True and fervent belief in the innate goodness and wisdom of the tyrant makes it possible to wield hegemonic power which is reinforced by violence. And Duvalier does create a state religion of violence. He publicly proliferated a state prayer, which reads “Our father who art in the national palace, hallowed be thy name” and goes on to ask forgiveness for “anti-patriotic thoughts” but to let anti-patriots “succumb to the weight of their own evil” (Danticat 185). This bastardization of religious prayer is codified in violence. It takes a beloved facet of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer, which resonates and is recognizable by most, and twists it into a nightmarish shell of its former existence. Through narrative control and violence, Duvalier creates a social order with himself at the top. In doing so, he creates hegemonic, or ultimate control, which Connell notes in his book *Gender and Power*, as the ability to: “impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideals and define morality, in short to assert hegemony” (107). Duvalier uses violence in conjunction with a public narrative of self-deification, tapping in to the legitimate authority inherent in the concept of God the Father, in order to obtain the power of a god. Violence is coercive. It inspires fearful obedience, but it does not change hearts or minds. Deification, especially the center of a state religion of violence, on the other hand, allows the infiltration of people’s minds, a bombarding of the formulation of ideals and defined morality. God the father has unquestionable authority. The power and authority are

inherent in the very nature of the titles of God and father. Duvalier further solidifies this violent religion which positions himself as arbiter of morality through the creation of local enforcement squads named the Tonton Macoute. He “named his volunteer militia after the mythic figure of the Tonton Macoute, a bogeyman who abducted naughty children at night and put them in his knapsack” (Danticat 216). The Father has control and authority to punish naughty children. Through this narrative which is laden with implicit, unquestioned power and authority, Duvalier restructured the understanding of reality that Haitian people had and bent it toward his will. The volunteer militia, of which the Dew Breaker forms a part, gain seemingly legitimate authorization of their torturing and violent ways from the man at the top. Individual violent acts and self-justifying narratives are spun within the state ideology in which Duvalier is the Father who determines public truth and ordains morality through the manipulation of religious and spiritual narratives.

Like Duvalier, Alphonso also asserts hegemony through a narrative of self-deification. In the first lines of the novel we see Alphonso manipulating and silencing Celie’s spirituality. Walker writes: “*You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy*” (Walker 1). With these words, Celie’s father defines an uncaring, masculine God. The God that Alphonso allows Celie to pray to is not a being who cares about rape. Rather, this God supports the violence of an abuser. In his work, “Pa is Not Our Pa,” Powers notes: “early in the novel, the alien character of God serves merely to undergird Celie’s oppressed existence . . . a God who is [. . .] male represents the possibility of a transcendent violence directed against African Americans as a whole and African-American women in particular” (71). Alphonso gives Celie permission to pray to a God who supports the patriarchal power that fathers have over their daughter. For Alphonso, the divine allows him to assert control and dominance over Celie - he is creating a God for his daughter who condones violence. Through his words “*you better not tell nobody but God*” (Walker 1) he attempts to define the

nature of the God his daughter is in relationship with. He is ‘playing God,’ naming and labeling a supreme deity as one who works in his favor. A person who has the ability to define God also takes on the role of God, because the capacity to define and to set the terms by which another person understands the divine is the ultimate assertion of hegemony. Celie responds to this deification narrative submissively. Alphonso has the physical power to rape. The father has the ability to impregnate her, to create life. When Alphonso steals the assumedly incestuous child from Celie’s side at night, we learn that he also has the power to take this life away. While on her deathbed, Celie’s mother asks about her daughter’s pregnancy: “She ast me about the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (2). Celie names the father of her child, Alphonso, as God. In doing so, she aligns the “transcendent violence” mentioned by Powers with the omnipotence of her father’s violence. God’s child is born of incestuous, violent rape. In naming her rapist as God, she also adheres to Alphonso’s command to “not tell nobody but God” (1). Celie does not know any other men because she is at home caring for her siblings and mother. It would be ludicrous to lie and blame the neighbor because at this point in her life she is completely isolated. Alphonso is the only male candidate, but she has been forbidden from speaking his name, and so she calls him God. Celie’s mother then asks where the baby is: “Finally she ast Where it is? I say God took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can” (2). Not only does Alphonso have the ability to create life in Celie, he also has the ability to take away life, to murder, and there is nothing that Celie can do about it. She has accepted Alphonso’s deification narrative. In doing so, she is helpless. There is legitimate authority in the concept of God because God is all-powerful and his decrees are inevitable. He has the ability to give life and to take it away, and Celie has no recourse. Thus, Alphonso’s religious narrative control is effective. It allows him to do what he wills to Celie’s body and her children, while also leaving him guilt-free because Celie is

“evil” and deserving of any ill that comes to her. Alphonso has control and does not need to question or second guess this power because he is the one who is defining the morality of the situation and has control over how his victim perceives her own rape and the loss of her children.

Similarly to Duvalier and Alphonso, the Dew Breaker pursues the power of a God. Reflecting on his methods of torture, one of his victims notes: “He’d wound you, then try to soothe you with words, then he’d wound you again. He thought he was God” (Danticat 199). Fuchs aligns with this interpretation, writing that the character of the Dew Breaker “can be read as a representative of dictatorial power in the story cycle” (56). The Dew Breaker attempts to convince his victims that he has the omnipotence of a god. However, despite pursuing this control, the Dew Breaker is constrained by his role as torturer. His power is limited because he must maintain control over his victims or risk personal harm. Buchbinder notes, “It is less obvious, but also important, that the practice of those who hold power is constrained as well. Men are empowered in gender relations, but in specific ways which produce their own limits” (108). The Dew Breaker cannot have full autonomy over his own actions because he is constrained by the requirements of his own role as a torturer. In order to maintain his reputation, he must be able to exert bodily, physical control over prisoners. In the final pages of the book, the Dew Breaker commands a Volunteer to bring a prisoner into his office. During the brief interlude before this order is carried out “he felt the usual tightening in his throat. It was something he always faced in the few moments before confronting a prisoner. Would the prisoner be fearful, bold? Would he/she put up a fight?” (Danticat 218). The Dew Breaker is a torturer in his own office - the beast at home in his own lair. He has every physical advantage over the helpless. Yet he *still* feels fear of the unknown, and a lack of control in this situation. The compliance of a beaten, starved prisoner cannot be fully guaranteed because the will to resist may still be intact. There is the chance - albeit a

small one - of an altercation, and the Dew Breaker could experience a moment of danger and be revealed to have flesh that can be harmed and a life that can be taken. Although he goes to great lengths to convince his prisoners otherwise, even in his own office interrogating a prisoner, the Dew Breaker does not have perfect control. Despite what he wants his prisoners to believe, his power is limited because it is bequeathed to him by the hierarchical system of the government, not self generated. The Dew Breaker's power is constrained because he exists in a hierarchical system where Duvalier is at the top. Duvalier's deification and creation of a hierarchical social structure empowers the Tonton Macoute to be hunters, not prey. However, the Dew Breaker must carry out the will of the regime or risk losing his position of power as a Tonton Macoute. During his last days in Haiti, he is commanded to kill a political dissident named only as the preacher. When he misses the important nuance that he must do so quietly, his directions change: he needs to release the preacher so that there is no chance of the man becoming a public martyr. The Dew Breaker's control is challenged because the preacher's body is the site where the constraints placed on the Dew Breaker's through his role as torturer come into opposition. In the moments before the preachers release, the prisoner stabs the Dew Breaker in the face with the shard of wood. With the preacher stabbing him, the facade of control crumbles, and he is left powerless, caught between his need to protect himself from physical violence and the need to carry out the will of the state. He must kill, because to not would be an admission of his own lack of control over the situation and clearly demonstrate that he is man, not omnipotent god. However, this shooting is an unpardonable deviation from the requirements of continued governmental sanction. As Rosalie, his captain notes about the series of blunders: "'You took too many liberties. You disobeyed.' He had failed her, and himself" (218). The Dew Breaker rapidly loses the ability to enact his own will on the situation and is revealed to be in a very delicate position. Due to his failure, the Dewbreaker is exposed to the full brunt of a system where

even the people he calls his friends will ultimately do what is best for themselves. Although Rosalie says that she'll think of a way to explain this mishap to Duvalier, he knows that "Ultimately she would do what was best for her, taking responsibility if the president changed his mind once again and applauded the preacher's death or leaving the blame on him if she was reproached" (230). The power of the Dew Breaker, previously so seemingly boundless, is revealed to be a tenuous, delicate affair. The Dew Breaker's power is not self-derived. It is transactionally provided by Duvalier in return for the perpetuation of violence and is contingent on fulfilling the will of the state. If it was given by Duvalier, then by Duvalier it can be taken away. The Dew Breaker has made a grave error and is at risk of becoming a powerless victim in the very system where he once exerted control. "Once he was out on the street, he felt for his face, finding his fingertips delving inside his own flesh, as though he'd been wearing a rubber mask that was peeling away" (230). The mask of his own power is punctured, and we are shown that the man who plays God is not all powerful but a subject within a power hierarchy which is rapidly crumbling beneath his feet.

The Dew Breaker: An Abuser Unchanged

Stumbling out into the street after killing the preacher, illusions of control shattered, the Dew Breaker meets his future wife Anne. She literally runs into him in the street, both of them there because of their connection to the preacher - The Dew Breaker, his murderer, and Anne his stepsister. The Dewbreaker does not know who this woman is, but he hopes that she is not one of his former victims because he wants her to extend him kindness. "He wanted sympathy, compassion from her. He wanted her to have pity on him, take him to her house and bandage him. Even if she despised him for some reason or another, he wanted her to help him" (Danticat 231). At this moment, the Dew Breaker knows precisely what he wants. He requires sympathy after the power structure has crumbled and exposed him as vulnerable. For the first time in this chapter of the book, he is on the underside of the power dynamic, and he

latches on to Anne like a drowning man clings to a piece of driftwood. He dissuades her from entering the jail and instead she agrees to accompany the man who killed her stepbrother back to his house and spends the night. The Dew Breaker “was happy she was there to watch him sleep . . . In the morning, he would make all the important decisions that needed to be made” (233). From the moment they meet, the Dewbreaker wraps Anne into his life. It happens because it suits him and because she is there in the moment where he is at his most vulnerable and does not spurn him. He is the one who will make the important decisions. For her part, Anne does not choose to interrogate why the Dew Breaker had been outside the jail. She assumes his victimhood, and tells him so: ““What did they do to *you*?” she asked. This was the most forgiving question he’d ever been asked. It suddenly opened a door, produced a small path, which he could follow. ‘I’m free,’ he said. ‘I finally escaped’” (237). Anne’s response opens the door to a course of action. She gives him the benefit of the doubt and buys herbs to heal the Dew Breaker’s face, patching the punctured mask and reaffixing his sense of control. Anne allows the Dew Breaker to imagine a new power, a nameless, faceless identity that uses Anne as a mask to conceal himself. They are both incredibly vulnerable at this moment; Anne’s step-brother has just been murdered and the Dew Breaker is at risk of becoming a victim to violence at the hands of the system which he previously endorsed. The Dewbreaker briefly wonders why this woman, a stranger, bothers to stay. “What made him think there would be a later?” (237). To answer this question he does not speak to Anne; rather, he tells himself a story, a story which rapidly becomes indistinguishable from reality. “It was obvious that she now felt she’d been there to save him, to usher him back home and heal him” (237). This is a possessive narrative. It is his greatest mechanism of control – to murder a man, and marry his sister, delusionally thinking that she appeared to save him. It is cruel that this man narcissistically desires the compassion he never had for his victims. “He had escaped from his life. He could no longer return to it, no longer wanted to” (237).

Certainly he is escaping the reality of his career as a torturer, sacrificing a position of power where he held control over his victims in a violently brutal way. But he is also escaping the power dynamic that is limiting. He is escaping the rules of a system where there can only be one all-powerful father figure. In exchange for giving up torturing, he gains control over Anne. This is an exchange not a change. It is not the mark of a changed man - Anne does not save him. He gives up constrained power for a near limitless ability to spin stories and contextualize the truth in America, later. Their relationship is immediately defined by silence. "He would tell her the real truth later, much later, once he'd told her a series of other things, about his mother, his father, the garden, Léogâne" (237). He will tell her about his occupation as torturer in Haiti, but only when he has full power over the narrative and the ability to justify his own actions at length. The truth will be told in America, after she has given birth to their daughter and deeply enmeshed in his story. The Dew Breaker does not give Anne the resources to make an informed choice about whether or not she wants to stay and care for him. He fails to disclose incriminating information, because she would not stay with him knowing the truth. Instead he capitalizes on her willingness to assume his victimhood and within a day of meeting each other, he and Anne travel together to America. His tendrils of control tighten as he takes her away from Haiti and the familiar. He isolates her, physically, from any social support networks such as family or friends. "When they arrived in New York and an old army friend of his met them at the airport and he introduced her as his wife, she did not disagree" (240). Thus begins a relationship full of silences, of half truths, and of prioritization of the Dewbreaker's self. They go to the States and he speaks the label of wife into existence, which she passively accepts and "does not disagree" (240). Anne has relinquished full control over decision-making, over her husband's lies. Over time, they become used to the other, and a toxic relationship forms. "Theirs became a kind of benevolent collaboration, a conspiratorial friendship. With few others to turn to, it became

love. Yes, love. But not the kind of love her daughter or girls like her stumbled into or might expect one day. It was a more strained kind of attachment, yet she could no longer imagine her life without it” (240–41). Anne names their relationship as love, but not love. She calls it love and in the next sentence, renames it as a strained attachment that she cannot imagine her life without. She cannot imagine her life without the Dewbreaker. He has crafted the web of silences and narrative manipulation so well that she does not have the ability to tell her own story, and admits this to herself. “Unlike her husband, she would never know how to tell a story like this, how to decipher all the details and make sense of them” (240). Anne does not have the ability to assert a productive narrative. She does not have the positive capacity to assert her own contextualization of trauma or to make sense of the details from her own narrative framework. Murphy in his book *Beyond Feminism* writes: “When a woman lacks the independent capacity to assert her own positive truths and values, she is unable to contribute her insights and experiences to the various fields of human knowledge” (45). This is deeply problematic because “the capacity of every person to have a full human life depends upon their opportunities to develop and express the deepest potentials of the mind and heart” (44). Anne does not have this chance, because of her husband’s ability to dominate the narrative and control his version of events. Their relationship is defined by his control and her passivity.

Mr. Bienamé not only suppresses Anne’s narrative agency, but also that of his daughter. He delineates the nature of his relationship with Ka from the moment she is born when he names her after Egyptian mythology. “‘Ka,’ he says, ‘I tell you why I named you Ka’” (Danticat 16). From this sentence, we learn that it is her father that named her, not her mother. The twice-repeated “I” is possessive; it has ownership over the daughter’s name and identity. Despite Anne’s objects to the name, saying that her daughter will be teased and nicknamed Kaka, which translates to ‘shit’ in Hatian Creole (16). His wife has carried and

birthed the child, but Mr. Bienamé gets to name, and begins to construct an identity for his daughter. Mr. Bienamé erases his daughters connection to Haitian culture and replaces it with an identity sourced in his fascination with Ancient Egyptian culture. He names his progeny as his soul. ““You see, ka is like soul,’ my father now says. ‘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). In this passage Ka’s father names her as his ka, his ti bon anj, and his good angel, the literal translation of ti bon anj. He is willing to claim and own the body and identity of his daughter. In employing the power of naming, he engages in a process of identity-giving to suit his own needs. In naming Ka, he references at least two religious trains of thought – Egyptian and Hatian Voodoo – in order to define the nature of the relationship that exists between them. A Ka is a “double of the body . . . the body’s companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead” (17). Thus, Ka is directly associated with the protection or shield. This aligns closely with the scapegoating mechanism that Alphonso and the Dew Breaker so readily applied to their victims, with a young female daughter carrying away the guilt of the father. Meanwhile, the second name, ti bon anj, is defined by Mocombe in *Haitian Epistemologies*: “it is the ti bon anj that houses the ego, self, personality and ethics of the person from experiences in life [. . .] (i.e. the individual ego or ‘I’ of a human individual as they experience being in the world with others)” (86). Mr. Bienamé identifies his daughter as a receptacle for the burden of his own moral guilt. A ti bon anj houses the ethics from experiences; in naming Ka as such, it becomes incriminatingly clear that he understands Ka as an extension of himself and ethical protector. Bellamy understands this naming as a potential for renewal. In her work, “More than Hunter or Prey” she writes: “By naming his daughter Ka and calling her his "good angel," Bienaimé attempts to create a good twin of himself, one who will receive and reflect his goodness. Ka's birth inspires self-reflection and revelation, prompting her father to confess to his wife the nature of his work in

the prisons” (8). Mr. Bienamé does attempt to create a good twin of himself through Ka, and therein lies the crux of the problem – he views Ka as an extension of himself. He has the power to name and to define – to craft identity and hold power over another with his words. Ka’s father explicitly labels her, from birth. The self-reflection and revelation which Bellamy claims Mr. Bienamé experiences never seems to change his need to exert control over others. Ka is living out to perfection the role that her father has chosen for her. He could have given her a name that freed her, a name that attempted to move beyond the cycles of generational trauma. Instead, he explicitly named his infant daughter as his protector, his guide, and a double of his own guilty conscience. It is no accident that Ka’s father bonded with her over the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Egyptian mythology is the one vehicle by which he has taken the time to develop a relationship with her in a meaningful way. It is the thing they share in common, by her father’s choice. Through the conflation of his own soul with that of Ka, Mr. Bienamé imposes a demanding, consuming identity on his daughter – and he is effective. Ka consciously chooses to take on this role and set her own needs aside: “since he’d recovered from the measles and hadn’t died as we’d both feared, I’d vowed to myself to always tolerate, even indulge him, letting him take me places I didn’t enjoy and read me things I cared nothing about, simply to witness the joy they gave him, the kind of bliss that might keep a dying person alive” (18). When she was young, Ka was alternately bored and scared by the Egyptian mythology that her father read to her. He did not ask what she wanted to read or what constituted her taste in literature. Instead, he, the father, chooses to introduce a religious text and gives her positive feedback when she responds. After Ka is scared by the idea of her father dying, she commits herself to indulging him and to making him happy. Ka becomes the person that her father wills her to be. She fulfills the role of representing her father's soul as she was so named to do.

One way that Ka fulfills the narrative of her father's choosing is through her career as an artist. Their trips to the museum are formative; she chooses a career as a sculptor "to make statues that would amaze my father even more than these ancient relics" (Danticat 19). This choice of career is unsurprising, especially given positive reinforcement and attention he shows her while visiting the Brooklyn Museum. Ka describes her father as 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 (Danticat 13). Her father is, of course, the subject of her first work of art. There are traces of her father in everything Ka does; with the creative power akin to that of a God, it seems he has sculpted the sculptor. At the beginning of the "The Book of the Dead" Ka creates a sculpture of her father in prison entitled "*Father.*" It is an artistic representation of her father's life in Haiti living during the Duvalier regime, a brutal Hatian dictatorship. The "three-foot mahogany figure of my father naked, kneeling on a half-foot-square base, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands . . . was the way I had imagined him in prison" (6). The statue is Ka's imagining of her father's history of victimhood, the lie that he has told her, and an identity that she has rendered tangible in mahogany. She and Mr. Bienamé are on their way to sell Ka's sculpture to Gabrielle Fonteneau, a Hatian-American actress who is quite famous in the community. In creating this statue, Ka sculpted the narrative of her father's innocence into reality, and is on her way to codify this victimhood in the Hatian-American diaspora through the sale of the piece to Ms. Fonteneau. But, this never happens. At the start of the book, her father and the statue are missing, and when he does return, we learn that Mr. Bienamé has destroyed the statue by throwing it in an artificial lake. When he returns without the statue, Mr. Bienamé tells her, "I don't deserve a statue" (19). This is perhaps, seemingly a humble moment, an

admission of guilt. The sculpture which falsely portrays him as innocent provokes him to tell his daughter about his past for the first time, relating the truth that “your father was the hunter, he was not the prey” (20). Bellamy would see this confession of truth as a moment of change, made possible by Ka’s “embodiment of the union of hunter and prey” the figure who “unites the two extremes” (6). She highlights the ability of Ka’s sculpture to prompt confession: “Later, Ka's sculpture (a different type of "ka") prompts him to confess this truth to his daughter. . . . While Ka realizes that her father's narrative could help him to hide from his past, the story of her name actually leads him to confession, attesting to his journey of contrition and facilitating the possibility of a meaningful relationship with his daughter” (8-9). It is important, however, to interrogate the context of truth-telling. Mr. Bienamé does tell his daughter about the sins of the past, but his motives and manner of telling do not facilitate relationship, Ka’s agency, or in any way loosen the control he possesses. Instead of talking to her about the statue, he carries away her art and destroys it first, forcing Ka into the vulnerable position of having no sculpture to deliver to Gabrielle Fonteneau. Mr. Bienamé also has no qualms about abducting and drowning this “different type of ‘ka’” (8). In her article “Papa’s Masks” Conwell notes:

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 (Conwell 7–8)

Mr. Bienamé returns to his former role as a torturer through abducting and drowning the statue, as well as through the way he physically grips Ka when she begins to laugh hysterically after he tells her the truth of his past. To stop her laughter, he grabs her wrist. “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” (Danticat 20). In this act of violent physical coercion, he returns to the role of violent torturer to control Ka’s reaction. This is not the mark of a man demonstrating humble contrition; rather, grabbing her wrist in the same way as he did with the preacher, his last prisoner, Ka’s father censors her reaction and controls.

Mr. Bienamé’s destruction of Ka’s statue seems to be an odd departure from his purpose in naming Ka as savior. After all, she seemingly is about to fulfill her role as a restorative ‘good angel’ through choosing to sculpt her father as a victim. Why would he disallow this narrative of his own innocence to be perpetuated throughout the Haitian-American community? It seems that in a last-second change of heart, Ka’s father decided that he would rather be unnamed and faceless instead of innocent. Not having a label is power. By destroying the statue, Mr. Bienamé prevents her creation of a narrative of innocence which can be proven wrong. The innocent can be proven guilty; a nameless void cannot be brought to justice. This parallels observations about masculinity by Buchbinder in his work *Studying Men and Masculinities*:

white men (and particularly white middle-class men) enjoyed a measure of power that was linked to their being “unmarked.” That is, because “gender” appeared to refer to and mean “women,” and “race,” “black” and other people of color, to be male and white constituted not only a norm but also a “natural” kind of identity. The effect of this was to erase white masculinity from the social picture, so that white masculine power appeared to recede into the background, if not, indeed, to vanish entirely (20).

Mr. Bienamé is not white, although he is an immigrant who experiences a different sort of erasure from the sight of white society. Like Odysseus telling the cyclops that “No One blinded him” and in doing so erasing himself and avoiding the retribution that would be sure to come from the neighbors, so Mr. Bienamé realises that he gains power by being unnamed in the greater diasporic community. He too can slip unnoticed through the fingers of those who would demand punitive justice. In disallowing Ka to sell the statue, Mr. Bienamé is maintaining control over who gets to tell his narrative, and how. Ka reflects on this during the long drive home: “The only thing I can grasp now . . . is why the unfamiliar might have been so comforting, rather than distressing, to my father. And why he has never wanted the person he was, is, permanently documented in any way. He taught himself to appreciate the enormous weight of permanent markers by learning about the Ancient Egyptians” (34)

Perhaps this is what speaks to Mr. Bienamé from the Egyptian religion; their mythology has lasted for millenia and can still be judged on its own merits today. That which is named is made real, it is fixed and defined and can be put on trial and found meritorious or lacking. The power lies in the hands of the one who judges, rather than in what is judged. In choosing to surround himself in the practices of a particular religion, Ka’s father is the one who judges, not the other way around. Ka realizes: “He had gotten to know [the Ancient Egyptians], through their crypts and monuments, in a way that he wanted no one to know him, no one except my mother and me, we, who are now his kas, his good angels, his masks against his own face” (34). Through learning the specificities of the religion, he learns how vulnerable one can be. Ka names herself and her mother as Mr. Bienamé’s masks. A mask is specifically molded to form a particular expression, or shape. It is rigid, maintaining its pre-determined shape whether worn or not. A drama mask is designed to both conceal and portray emotion. Considering that Ka’s father has named her and raised her to be a certain rigid shape, to fulfil the purpose of protecting his identity and secrets, the metaphor of the mask fits. Mr. Bienamé

continuously plays the role of God. His relationships with his wife and daughter are not indicative of a man who has changed and given up the obsessive need for control that he demonstrates in Haiti. Rather, he displays the same types of narrative control and pursuit of deification as we see him evince during his time as a torturer. He may have largely stopped perpetuating physical violence, but the underlying structures of beliefs and desperate need for control which allowed him to torture in the first place have not shifted.

Empowering Women: Danticat and Walker's Response to Abuse

Mr. Bienamé names Ka; in so doing, he exerts his will over another individual and creates a possessive, toxic relationship. Naming is extraordinarily powerful, as it is deeply sourced in the creation of personal identity. The ability to name and define identity is a sophisticated and effective manifestation of power that has the capacity to shape how an individual understands themselves. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's stepson, Harpo names his acquiescent girlfriend Squeak. "Harpo little yellowish girlfriend sulk, hanging over the bar. She a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say. He give her a little nickname, too, call her Squeak" (Walker 83). Harpo's nicknaming is similar to the manner in which Mr. Bienamé defines Ka's identity and the nature of their relationship. Squeak is a patronizing nickname - a mouse, which you might keep for a pet, squeaks. Inanimate objects, such as doors, might squeak annoyingly when opened. The noise is momentarily bothersome, commonplace, and easily dismissed. By naming his girlfriend, Harpo establishes a relationship of owner and pet. He uses language to gain power. Tucker notes this in her work "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" writing: "Walker has suggested that the development of the whole individual is related to the expression of language . . . She has created a text that shows language as power" (82). Harpo sets the term of the relationship and Squeak's development of individual identity is diminished; she does not challenge the nickname and its connotations of worthlessness because she "do anything Harpo say"

(Walker 83). By taking on this nickname, she accepts Harpo's naming as legitimate authority that he holds over her - that is, until she is raped by her uncle. Celie narrates: "Squeak come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe . . . He took my hat off, say Squeak. Told me to undo my dress. She drop her head, put her face in her hands. My god, say Odessa, and he your uncle. He say if he was my uncle he wouldn't do it to me. That be a sin. But this just little fornication." (97-98). Squeak experiences a trauma which is similar in nature to Alphonso's rape of Celie. Each instance is assumedly incestuous. However, Squeak is able to gain a measure of self control when Shug encourages her to speak about her experience. Squeak metamorphizes from a woman who has endured raped to a woman who is brave enough to tell her story. Directly after this event, Squeak renames herself as Mary Agnes, exerting a positive identity for herself. "She turn her face up to Harpo. Harpo, she say, do you really love me, or just my color? Harpo say, I love you Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist. She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say" (99). Here, Mary Agnes (re)names herself. This action is crucially dissimilar from that of Harpo and Mr. Bienamé because she does not force an identity on another person. Instead, she chooses to articulate her own identity, gaining agency. Through this self naming, Mary Agnes also changes the dynamic of her relationship with Harpo. She no longer accepts a belittling nickname because she is no longer the same person as Squeak, who accepted Harpo's patriarchal control. Mary Agnes is a trauma survivor with friends who support her - a woman who has gained control over herself.

Another moment of redefinition occurs when Shug relabels Celie's sexual status as virgin. This moment occurs between Celie and Shug when they are talking about their vastly different experiences of sex with the same man. Celie explains that when it comes to conjugal relations, her husband "do his business, get off, go to sleep. [Shug] start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the

toilet on you. That what it feel like, I say. She stop laughing. You never enjoy it at all? she ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy? Never, I say. Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin” (Walker 80). Shug is not naming a person at this moment; she does not assign nomenclature like Harpo does to Squeak or Mr. Bienamé and his daughter. Rather, this redefinition of Celie’s sexual experience is akin in substance to the way that Alphonso labels Celie as evil, or how Mary Agnes’ uncle falsely labels her as unrelated to justify rape. Shug uses the label virgin because Celie has never enjoyed sex, completely reorienting Celie’s understanding of her own sexuality. Despite years of rape and two pregnancies, virginity is no longer something that can be stolen from her by a man. Instead, it is something that she can choose to give away. The difference between Shug’s action and men who label is that Shug’s labeling of Celie’s virginity does not justify violence. It is not designed to grant her control over Celie. Shug’s labeling empowers and is an example of the way in which labeling can be used positively. In *The Color Purple*, females carving out the power to label does not come at the cost of male disempowerment. Applying the label of virgin does not cause harm to anyone, and does not lead to rape. Shug is a powerful woman because she has the ability to sculpt reality, however she does to choose to wield this ability to gain control. Rather, through her words “you still a virgin” she offers Celie a different way of understanding the world which gives Celie agency. (80). It allows Celie to reframe the rape she was powerless to stop. The body, which was the source of such horror, is relabeled in a positive light.

Shug empowers Celie not only through labeling her as virgin, but also through helping her explore and take control over her own body and sexuality. Alphonso and the Dew Breaker use their bodies as implements of torture and control over female bodies. Healing from this trauma is also located in the body in the context of loving, playful relationships. Shug encourages Celie to look at her own genitals for the first time. She does so while Shug stands watch at the door.

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose. It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say from the door. It mine, I say. Where the button? Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little. I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me (79).

After enduring years of violent abuse at the hands of her father and husband, Celie explores sexually, and this is freeing. Celie is able to learn from Shug and claim control over her own sexual, bodily pleasure. She acknowledges her body as beautiful, "like a wet rose" and also has hers "It mine" (79). In his work "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness" Lewis writes: "Walker represents black women's sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex. Celie's same-sex experiences begin to soothe the (sexist) wounds inflicted by Alphonso and Albert" (5). Celie gains control over her own body, empowered by Shug to pursue the knowledge of her own anatomy and pleasure. It is one of many first steps toward recovery from the sexual abuse of the past. This sexual exploring and vulnerability between women also creates a space in which trauma can be intimately discussed. It is, after all, in the bedroom where Celie relates the original rape by her stepfather. After this narrative of trauma, Shug says "I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. *Um*, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, *um*, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other" (115). Torturous force is a part of control over others; physical lovemaking creates a space where Celie is empowered to share her trauma and relinquish control and express emotion and "Way after a while, I act like a little lost baby too" (115). This moment counters the torturer and force espoused by abusers like the Dew Breaker and Alphonso, who use their bodies to inflict agonies and assert hegemony.

The same body is capable of both pleasure and pain. It is the mechanism by which individuals control and are controlled. Lewis understands Celie and Shug's lesbian sex as a breakdown of sexist hierarchy, allowing a victim of trauma to elicit a new, non-traumatic narrative from the body. "Together, Celie and Shug demonstrate a model of sexual vulnerability and mutual dependence that has them working together consensually toward self-love rather than relating hierarchically—an interaction different from Albert's masculinist relationship with Celie" (6). Walker depicts sexual love as a response to the physical torturing, and rape. Shug's language and actions allowed Celie to understand herself not as a victim, but as an agent. Celie is able to share her trauma in this sexual encounter, as she relates the details of her rape at the hands of Alphonso. Sexual vulnerability, and the intimate sharing of sexual trauma, is the antithesis of the bodily control which Alphonso and the Dew Breaker perpetuate to gain power over others.

Similarly to Walker, Danticat couches her most optimistic moments in shared experience of trauma. In *The Dew Breaker*, Beatrice, a Hatian-American seamstress shares her past trauma with Aline, who forms part of the next generation of Hatian-Americans. Aline is working as a journalist for a Hatian-American newspaper, and she is supposed to interview the retiring dressmaker. The interview, however, veers away from the intended topic of bridal dresses; instead, woman to woman, Beatrice bluntly shares the trauma that she experienced many years ago in Haiti, showing Aline her scars:

Beatrice removed her open-toed sandals and raised her feet so Aline could see the soles of her feet. They were thin and sheer like an albino baby's skin. "He asked me to go dancing with him one night," Beatrice said, putting her feet back in her sandals. "I had a boyfriend, so I said no. That's why he arrested me. He tied me to some type of rack in the prison and whipped the bottom of my feet until they bled. Then he made me walk home, barefoot. On tar roads. In the hot sun. At high noon (132).

This sharing of past trauma, bluntly, is a moment of clear truthfulness in the book. Amidst all the hidden connections and whispers of past trauma, Beatrice's story stands out because she is willing to speak plainly about the trauma that she has experienced. However, her narrative agency is limited in important ways. Beatrice articulates her fear of the nameless, faceless Haitian prison guard that she finds "wherever [she] rent[s] or buy[s] a house in this city" (132). Telling her story does not eradicate or really even mitigate her fear and paranoia. She tells Aline: "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" (137). The Dew Breaker is omnipresent, the scars of her past unescapable. Conwell notes that "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" (231). These men are never fully brought to justice. Although she is willing to speak plainly about what she has endured, Beatrice is a woman marked by fear, and Aline, the listener, does not have the sureness of self or salvific power of Shug. Aline is a stranger and her interview has been derailed. There is no relabeling moment between the women, like Shug redefining the term virgin so that Celie can truly live. Rather, the effect of this shared trauma is most impactful on Aline, rather than Beatrice. The reader learns that "Aline had never imagined that people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives . . . chasing fragments of themselves long lost to others" (138). In telling her story to a stranger, Beatrice does not experience the profound healing effect for herself that Celie gets. Beatrice is still haunted. Yet this truth-telling does have an impact on Aline; perhaps even going so far as to completely reroute the course of her life, the focus of her work. "These were the people Aline wanted to try to write about now . . . if Marjorie didn't like it, then she would quit and go work somewhere else. She might even return to Somerville and, at last, let her parents learn who she was" (138). Beatrice's story challenges Aline to tell the truth in her own life and

pursue meaningful work. After interviewing this woman, Aline is no longer the college graduate who took the newspaper internship “because it was the first paid job she was offered after she’d been dumped by her girlfriend, needing important–sounding work to report to both her ex – should they ever speak again – and her folks” (130). Beatrice’s honesty has given Aline the ability “to do something with her life” and help those similar to Beatrice to tell their stories (123). The shared story of trauma gives agency and is empowering. Beatrice may continue to be haunted by the man who inflicted such torture in the past, but she is living, and engaging with “her girls” despite fear. The truth about trauma is something that allows Beatrice to function in spite of her trauma, it does not solve it. She chooses to tell her story and to make wedding dresses for the Haitian–American community and to invest herself in art and her girls. Speaking trauma aloud does not change the fact that she has been tortured; nor does it diminish the psychological repercussions of said torture. However, Beatrice is able to function in the community despite the abuse, and she is able to create art and share her story with a stranger. Beatrice and Aline experience a moment: “But for now, she would simply sit with Beatrice and wait for some time to pass, so that she might see how the green ash leaves looked slowly falling from the tall tree in the very ordinary golden light of dusk” (138). This is an instant of peace and calm that takes place on the front porch in the evening, a moment of empowering women. Danticat gives us a reserved moment of tranquility. Aline as a listener is a college student from a different generation. She is not Shug, Celie’s freethinking guiding angel to whom the rules of society do not matter and who can put Celie’s world to rights. Aline does not have the close personal relationship necessary to reframe, or relabel Beatrice’s trauma, and she cannot fix it. However, the two are able to sit on the front porch and able to take in the evening sunlight. Danticat and Walker align significantly in their understanding of vulnerable community as an antidote to men like the Dew Breaker, Duvalier, and Alphonso. This openness and moment of human connection

between women is one of many baby steps toward refuting disempowering narratives of abuse.

Danticat does not end her solution to patriarchal norms with merely demonstrating the benefits of trauma shared between strangers. In her short story “The Funeral Singer” she depicts another moment of optimistic narrative sharing between close female friends. Freda, Mariselle, and Rézia’s openness about trauma stands out in stark contrast against *The Dew Breaker’s* backdrop of muffled violence. After leaving Haiti, Freda hopes she can share her story with the Hatian women in her GED class and that “exposing a few details of my life would inspire them to do the same and slowly we’d parcel out our sorrows, each walking out with fewer than we’d carried in” (170). This group of women spend time together. They cook a meal and “talk about what brought us here” (172). Their relationship is markedly different from the way in which Ka’s father interacts with his daughter. The silences are broken – indeed, the women hope to break them, and hope to share the burden of their pasts communally so that they can survive life in America. They do so as real friends, distinct from trauma shared between Aline and Beatrice. Freda shares that she fled Haiti because she refused to sing at the national palace, and that her father was tortured by the Tonton Macoute. She tells her friends that after her father returned from being taken by the torturers, “he didn’t have a tooth left in his mouth . . . The next night he took his boat out to sea and, with a mouth full of blood, vanished forever” (172). Another woman, Mariselle, came to America because her husband was shot for painting an unflattering picture of the president. The third, Rézia, was raped in her bedroom by a Macoute. The man was enabled to do so by her aunt after he “threatened to put her in prison if she didn’t let him have me that night” (173). These women offer their stories to each other as a way of sharing each other’s pain. In “Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness” Lewis writes: “Articulation of violation can lead to an awareness of individuals’ indebtedness to one another for their identities and thus become a fundamental

ethic of human care” (170). He writes this about Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*, but his point is fundamentally applicable to this scene in *The Dew Breaker*. Danticat’s women articulate the specific ways in which they have been violated in order to care. They are friends, and support each other through the difficult process of obtaining a GED. Each one has been victimized at the hands of men and by the Haitian government. Yet like Squeak gaining control over her own narrative through speaking about her rape, these women empower each other. They name and parcel out their sorrows, and “drink too much and stay too long at the restaurant” even when it becomes evident that Mariselle and Freda “may never get diplomas out of the class” (174). But it is not the GED that matters overmuch in this instance. They are not saved by efficient integration into the American system.

Americanization is not what will help these women. Rather, the context of their shared traumas binds them together in a sort of sisterhood and together they are able to adapt to life in the United States. It is significant that at this moment, Danticat’s fullest vision of community is female and loudly, uninhibitedly Haitian. Haiti is “not a lost cause yet,” Mariselle says, “because it made us” (179). Despite the suffering, their connection to each other and Haitian identity is a positive shaping force. Instead of the silences between Anne and Mr. Bienamé, Freda, Mariselle, and Rézia get drunk and belt out Brother Timonie. “We sing until our voices grow hoarse, sometimes making Brother Timonie a sister” (181). The funeral song is no longer a death moment, but a catalyst for new life sourced in feminine identity. It is a moment of hope that does not disregard, hide, or forget the trauma that these women have experienced, and does not downplay their Haitianess. “And for the rest of the night we raise our glasses, broken and unbroken alike, to the terrible days behind us and the uncertain ones ahead” (181). As depicted through the character of Beatrice, sharing trauma does not fix their experience of trauma. These women’s fathers and husbands were tortured, murdered and executed. Speaking and recontextualizing trauma together does not fix the

harms of the past; however, it is one of many little steps that they can take to live despite brutality they have survived.

Conclusion

Walker and Danticat show the dark side of humanity. Explicit depictions of rape and torture are laced throughout their respective books and they are unflinching in their representation of the ways in which misogynistic abusers wield control over others. They acknowledge that perpetrators of violence such as the Dew Breaker are not always brought to justice and may continue to exert hegemony over the innocent in ways which are terrifyingly effective. However, these authors also offer a feminist vision of how to live well and form meaningful relationships. Their sweeping casts of characters acknowledge patriarchy, yet never fall into binaries; Walker and Danticat acknowledge that abusers can be victimized and victims can commit abuse. Men are not all bad, and women may be torturers. In short, these authors are true to the human experience. They acknowledge the fundamental human ability to craft narrative and effectively demonstrate that this capacity may be wielded either for good or evil. The feminist solution, articulated by Danticat and Walker through powerful female characters, is sourced in communal, empowering identity. Control over one's own identity is a powerful antidote to those who would control others. Through analysis of characters like the Dew Breaker, Duvalier, Alphonso, Shug, Celie, Freda, Aline, and Squeak, readers can better equip themselves to identify selfish narratives and do the unending (and sometimes terrifying) work of living vulnerably empathetic lives. The power to torture and power to heal are not substantively different in nature and accessible by men and women alike; both genders experience and manifest power through the production of narrative, naming and labeling, and bodily interactions. Rather, Danticat and Walker make resoundingly clear that the personal choice to exert control over others or use our agency to empower defines the ability to live well.

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