

Hiding and Exposing Violence: Euphemisms in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*

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Edwidge Danticat's practice of using euphemisms in *The Dew Breaker* reflects the fact that historiography has often whitewashed the violent past of colonization, slavery, and dictatorships in the Caribbean and other parts of the world, which it describes in terms of enlightenment, Christianization, and progress.¹ As Robert M. Adams remarks, euphemisms are particularly used "for situations where codes or ideologies are under pressure" (45). Danticat's story cycle shows how euphemistic language promotes the un-silencing of the past in Haiti whereby the text establishes links from the post-dictatorial era to the Duvalier dictatorships to colonialism and emphasizes the connections between language and power.

Danticat's story cycle *The Dew Breaker* (2004) consists of nine closely interrelated story chapters. Each story chapter is narrated or reflected by a different character. All of the narrators and focalizers relate to the title character, a former torturer under the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti, in various ways. The term "dew breaker" is the designation for a *Tonton macoute*,² a member of the secret police installed by François Duvalier with "a license to bully, extort and murder" (Ferguson 40). The term is the English translation of the Haitian Creole expression, *choukèt laroze*, which implies, as one of the victims in the book explains that the militiamen often broke into houses "before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away" (*Dew Breaker* 131). The result of these actions was often torture and death.

After either undergoing or doling out torture, both victims and perpetrators have experienced traumas that result in an inability to speak about their experiences. Formal aspects of the story cycle depict the complex entanglement of language and trauma. In Danticat's stories, the "dew breaker" ended his service for the dictatorship after disobeying

¹ The Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1969. Her parents immigrated to the U.S. for economic reasons when she was very small. She grew up with an aunt and an uncle in Haiti and followed her parents to the U.S. at age twelve. As a voice from the diaspora, Danticat's work rethinks the idea of Haitianness, focuses on the positive and negative aspects of migration, and is concerned with Haitian history and culture.

² *Tonton macoute* is a Haitian Creole term meaning *Uncle Knapsack*. It refers to "a traditional bogeyman who hunts down errant children and kidnaps them in his bag" (Ferguson 40). This folkloric term was transferred to Duvalier's militia (Desmangles 188).

the regime's orders. He had killed a prisoner who was supposed to be released. Consequently, he escaped to the U.S. where he tried to lead a *normal* life with his family under a different name, M. Bienaimé. In spite of the former torturer's attempt to silence and repress his past deeds and his life in anonymity, he has not been able to get rid of the memories of his violent past. These memories repeatedly come to the surface of his and his victims' consciousnesses. The story chapters reflect these memories from different perspectives, and the omnipresence of violence manifests itself in Danticat's use of language.

While reading *The Dew Breaker*, I repeatedly asked myself "How can a torturer be associated with a metaphor as poetic and beautiful as the dew?" In an interview, Danticat stated that she has "always been fascinated by the poetic naming of such a despicable authority figure" ("Conversation"). Accordingly, she decided "to translate the expression in the most serene sounding way [she] could. And so we have 'the dew breaker'" ("Conversation"). This positive image corresponds to the cover of the first Vintage paperback edition by Iris Weinstein. It shows a beach and a person wading into the ocean in the romantic light of dawn. This combination of cover and title as a marketing strategy evokes exotic images of a stereotypical Caribbean love story, and it forms a stark contrast to the actual topic of the book.³ Contrast can also be found in the book's content and its form by Danticat's portrayal of muted characters such as a torturer who has difficulties confessing his past to his daughter and his victims who try to find means of expressing their traumatic experiences.

Beyond the book's title and its cover, this article examines the tension between poetic beauty and violence in Danticat's use of language. It can be argued that, in *The Dew Breaker*, euphemistic language constitutes a means of aesthetically expressing the ambiguous and contradictory quality of phenomena such as violence and trauma. Rather than trivializing and exoticizing Haitian history, euphemisms help to convey unspeakable traumatic experiences and thereby contribute to finding new ways of healing. Euphemistic language strategies in *The Dew Breaker*, such as the dew breaker's act of naming himself "M. Bienaimé" ("Mr. Beloved") and the renegotiation of the dew as a metaphor, can be read as aesthetic means of expression if directly speaking about traumatic and violent experiences is too difficult for both victims and perpetrators. Thereby, euphemisms convey the ambiguity of language and they can be used to both hide and expose traumatic events, so that their openness offers new means of de-encapsulating a trauma. This is important since trauma not only affects those who directly experienced it; it is also often passed on to the following generation. In Danticat's book, the next generation is represented by the dew breaker's daughter Ka and by Dany whose parents were killed by the dew breaker. As some trauma critics have noted, language repeatedly fails to come to terms with trauma and pain. Directly after the traumatizing event, a person is often unable to speak about the experience because it is encapsulated as a mental survival reaction.⁴ The encapsulation

³ Nevertheless, *The Dew Breaker* can also be read as a kind of love story. In an interview with Danticat, Opal Palmer Adisa characterizes the story cycle as a love story, for which Danticat is grateful and states that love is "sometimes way beyond our control and out of our hands. It is really not something we can always guide. It guides and controls us" ("Up" 350).

⁴ Ruth Leys describes a posttraumatic stress disorder as "a disorder of memory" (2). A trauma leads to a

keeps the trauma outside of consciousness where it manifests itself as a subconscious latent presence (Assmann 259). In order to heal the wound, victims have to break its encapsulation, which becomes possible through its communication to the outside world. Thus, “the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath” (Laub 58). This paradoxical nature of silence as both exile and home points to the need of new ways of expressing pain, for instance through artistic strategies (Laub and Podell 993).⁵

Danticat’s text illustrates this traumatic encapsulation by using euphemisms that express the distance of traumatized persons to their experienced violence. In addition, language is both ambivalent and insufficient to express pain (Assmann 260). According to Elaine Scarry, pain is unsharable and “ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). Therefore, language is at the same time incapable of expressing traumatic experiences and essential for them to heal (Assmann 259). Euphemisms can be used to convey the ambiguity and contradictoriness that characterize language. Before analyzing Danticat’s use of euphemisms in *The Dew Breaker*, it is essential to introduce euphemisms as a literary device first, and to examine the background of the Haitian dictatorship and its political power structures second.

Euphemisms as a Literary and Political Strategy

Etymologically, the Greek term euphemism (εὐφημισμός) means to *speak fair*. As a rhetorical figure of speech, it stands for the replacement of an unfavorable word or expression with a more positive term “instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended” (“Euphemism”). Euphemisms are an indirect means of expression and function in a paradoxical and dual way. While they can be read as “words of good omen,” they negatively stand for “the avoidance of unlucky or inauspicious words” (Burchfield 13) that “may be taboo, fearsome, distasteful, or for some other reason have too many negative connotations” (Allan and Burridge 14). Euphemisms always remain ambiguous, as they aim to create harmony and silences by avoiding uncomfortable facts.

In order to prevent the negative connotations from dominating in Danticat’s text, the Martinican thinker Edouard Glissant’s concept of *détours* supports the positive connotations of euphemisms. Euphemisms as *détours* enable a roundabout way of communicating if speaking directly is impossible (*Caribbean Discourse* 23). Glissant defines his concept as “a disguise behind the symbol, to tell without telling. . . . What we have here

split of the mind, which then becomes “unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as past*, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present” (2; emphasis in original).

⁵ In their study “Art and Trauma,” Dori Laub and Daniel Podell speak about the “empty circle,” “[t]he feelings of absence, of rupture, and of the loss of representation” (992) that prevent trauma victims from articulating trauma even to themselves, and they discuss how literature expresses this emptiness.

is a form of literature that strives to express that which it is forbidden to designate, and finds, against this organic censoring, risky ways every time" ("Creolization" 272). As one option to express detours, euphemisms imply the complexity of trauma and the insufficiency of language to put it into words.⁶ However, this positive meaning is always accompanied and often outweighed by the negative connotation of euphemisms. Particularly with respect to political history, euphemistic language has often been abused to hide and repress unpleasant or distasteful facts that threaten positions of power.⁷ This function is reminiscent of the attempts of dictatorial regimes to conceal uncomfortable truths since power is always behind language, which is "essentially constitutive of institutional reality" (Searle 59).

The dew breaker in Danticat's story cycle is affected by these violent power structures. After disobeying the regime's orders and killing the preacher, his superior reassures him and promises she will "think of something to explain all this" (*Dew Breaker* 230). However, the dew breaker knows that he cannot trust her since "[u]ltimately 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). Words do not count much in this situation, so "it was possible that he would be arrested, even executed" (229). Therefore, the dew breaker decides to escape.

Language creates a perception of reality and, if many people agree, opinions and presentations of facts become supposedly real and objective as "things that exist only because we believe them to exist" (Searle 60). By using euphemisms, people in positions of power have aimed at constructing and stabilizing a reality that enables them to maintain their control and position on the top of a power hierarchy. Danticat's text plays with this construction of reality and brutally inverts it. The dew breaker arrested the preacher who was tortured in prison and "looks very bad" (*Dew Breaker* 218) even before he is interrogated by the dew breaker. When an orderly comes to accompany the preacher to his interrogation, he calls him "a lucky man" (220). Rather than believing his tormentor, the preacher expects to be led into a death chamber, and he interprets his *luck* as a euphemism since he had already been tortured. As a result, he attacks the dew breaker, who shoots him.⁸

The fact that the preacher cannot believe the dew breaker's true intentions of releasing him shows how deeply language is unmade by violence (Scarry 20). The preacher thinks he

⁶ For more on detours in Caribbean fiction, particularly with respect to intertextuality, see my dissertation.

⁷ Apparently neutral or even scientific terms such as *discovery* or *encounter* are used to replace terms with negative connotations such as Columbus's violent *conquest* in order to disguise violence and to *clean up* unpleasant facts (Pletsch 575). Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that "[d]iscovery' and analogous terms ensure that by just mentioning the event one enters a predetermined lexical field of clichés and predictable categories that foreclose a redefinition of the political and intellectual stakes. Europe becomes the center of 'what happened.' Whatever else may have happened to other peoples in that process is already reduced to a natural fact: they were discovered" (115). Another example is the German dictator Hitler's term *Endlösung* ("final solution"). For a study of the Nazi's use of language to euphemize violence, see Viktor Klemperer and Adams.

⁸ For once, the dew breaker's words that he would let the preacher go if he stopped his sermons would not have been lies since he had instructions to release the preacher (218, 224).

has to fight for his life, which ironically provokes his death. In Danticat's story cycle *The Dew Breaker*, euphemisms become a strategy to expose the institutional abuse of language by those in power. While the rhetorical device stands for acts of hiding unpleasant facts, its conscious and deliberate use is a means of exposing this mechanism through building stark contrasts. Euphemisms in Danticat's story cycle, therefore, can be read as a way of resisting oppressive power structures since "language is sometimes the only weapon against brute force" (Allan and Burrige 234).

The translated term *dew breaker* may not overtly connect the title character to torture and violence, but the novel refrains from hiding unpleasant truths and facts.⁹ Against these silences, Danticat reinscribes torture victims and perpetrators into Haitian historiography. Danticat's own position as a diaspora writer who is both an insider and an outsider of Haitian culture allows her to think across borders and to criticize both Western and Haitian representations of Haitian history.¹⁰ In analogy, euphemisms express what Keith Allan and Kate Burrige have called a "doublethink," that is viewing things from contradictory points of view (227). The story cycle uses euphemisms as a language strategy for expressing complex phenomena like violence and trauma. The following analysis of euphemisms in Danticat's story cycle will demonstrate how euphemisms as a literary device unmask universal and absolute meanings by allowing for and consciously playing with ambiguity.

Euphemizing Violence in *The Dew Breaker*

Danticat lets the dew breaker's victim, Beatrice, define *dew breakers* as men who "break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they'd also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away" (131). In this quote, Danticat links the poetic break of dawn with the violent act of breaking into houses.¹¹ The term alludes to the time of daybreak and the poetic and idyllic image of dew on the leaves as the positive beginning of a new day and a hope for a better future for the Haitian nation.¹² At the same time, however, the term *breaker* connotes a violent intrusion beyond houses. It implies the act of breaking and destroying the bodies and psyches of those who are taken away, ending in torture and death. As a result, the term *dew breaker* as a euphemism both implies the act of hiding violence under poetic imagery and simultaneously exposing its ambiguity. Thereby, it creates a tension between an idyllic landscape and a new national consciousness on the one side and terrible acts of violence and torture in the course of Haitian history from the beginning of colonization through the Haitian revolution to the

⁹ Quite the contrary, the story cycle narrates violent episodes of Haitian history that were subdued to a process Trouillot has called "silencing the past" whereby he refers to the potential of the Haitian revolution. During the dictatorship, many Haitian intellectuals had to leave the country as they faced arrest and death (Glover ix). On this topic, also see Danticat's essay collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*.

¹⁰ Walter D. Mignolo has called this perspective "border thinking" (*Local Histories* 69).

¹¹ For an analysis of the tension between the poetic and the horror as a means of expressing the unspeakable, see Marie-Agnès Sourieau (96).

¹² This poetic connotation can be interpreted as Danticat's tribute to the indigenist tradition and to the Haitian writer Jacques Roumain, which will be analyzed later in this article.

Duvalier dictatorships in the twentieth century on the other side. In addition, this ambiguity embraces the dew breaker's complexity as a character.

Rather than reducing him to an evil torturer and murderer, Danticat's story cycle depicts the dew breaker as an ambiguous character in analogy to his euphemistic name. The reader is confronted by an image of a man who is a loving father and husband and a quiet elderly man with "velvet-brown eyes" (4). After the disappearance of her father at the beginning of the first story chapter, "The Book of the Dead," the dew breaker's daughter Ka is so worried about him that she lies in his unmade bed (8). This image of their intimacy demonstrates their close and loving relationship. At the same time, Ka gets a brief glimpse of her father's violence, which intrudes the father-daughter relationship. After the dew breaker disposes of Ka's statue of him as an innocent prisoner, Ka laughs at him as a way to express her anger. Unable to endure what he perceives as his daughter's scorn and ridicule, the dew breaker violently grabs her wrist, so that she "feel[s] his fingers crushing the bone, almost splitting it apart" (20). After realizing his force, the dew breaker says: "I did not want to hurt you. I did not want to hurt anyone" (20). Nevertheless, he did hurt them. This complexity of the dew breaker's character represents the ambiguous nature of language on the level of content. The dew breaker's ambiguity reflects the fact that no human being is entirely good or evil, whereby Danticat avoids simple dichotomies and points to the necessity of finding new aesthetic means of speaking about violence.

One of these means is the euphemistic name of the dew breaker: "M. Bienaimé." He is described as a man *well loved*, a description he seems to aim for to create a distance from his violent acts.¹³ Just like a euphemism that emerges "[w]here there is an unwelcome truth to be hidden from others or oneself" (Adams 45), Danticat shows how the dew breaker hides his violent trait beneath the new identity of M. Bienaimé in order to protect himself and his family. This euphemistic act of hiding becomes obvious in the other characters' names for the dew breaker. The reader never learns his actual name. He is anonymously called "my father" (3) by his daughter Ka, the landlady's "husband" (36) by his tenant Eric, "husband" (70) by his wife Anne, the "barber" (105) by his victim Dany, and "choukèt lawoze" (131) by his victim Beatrice. None of these names exposes the dew breaker's true identity. Danticat said that she did not name the dew breaker because she wanted to make the reader aware that "even the name he has is a fake name, and [that she] wanted to leave the possibilities open" ("Haiti" 14). This openness creates a distance, which serves as a counter-balance to the immediate acts of violence described in the story cycle.

The act of calling powerful and violent people by euphemistic names has been a common practice.¹⁴ Danticat's euphemistic name for the dew breaker, who can be read as a representative of dictatorial power in the story cycle, is an allusion to the euphemistic names for the Haitian dictator François Duvalier and his son and successor Jean-Claude Duvalier who are known as "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc." Doubly euphemized as a doctor and a father, François Duvalier regarded himself as the father of the nation, "not only father, but 'Father' with a capital 'F,' public arbiter of life and death" (Conwell 223).¹⁵ The

¹³ *Bien-aimé* can be translated as *lover, loved one, or beloved*. The verb *aimer bien* means *to like*.

¹⁴ Death and diseases also tend to be euphemized (Allan and Burrige 229).

¹⁵ François Duvalier was already called "Papa Doc" before he became president due to his reputation as a

euphemistic naming of the dictator as “Papa Doc” alludes to a benevolent attitude toward the Haitian people combined with his education as a physician, which suggests trustworthiness. However, with hindsight, this allusion is deeply ironic since, rather than being a benevolent father, Duvalier killed and tortured thousands of people. Danticat transfers the euphemism of the dictator’s name to his henchman, the unnamed *Tonton macoute* or “dew breaker.”

In addition, the dew breaker’s namelessness suggests that he can be read as a type, as the perpetrator as such. He represents the many unknown perpetrators, the henchmen of the Haitian dictatorships, who have never been sentenced or punished and “that we are literally unable to name” (Danticat, “Haiti” 14).¹⁶ This linguistic anonymity implies the fact that violence is linked to de-individualization and distancing. Zygmunt Bauman describes, how during the Holocaust, it became easier to kill people by making them invisible and by creating a distance between victims and perpetrators in order to “optically separate the killers from their victims” (26). This distance also made the victims’ humanity invisible so that perpetrators could refrain from regarding their deeds as immoral actions (Bauman 24-27). The dew breaker’s anonymity increases the distance to his victims and thus facilitates his acts of torture and murder. For instance, the dew breaker as the focalizer calls his victim “the preacher” (*Dew Breaker* 183), instead of calling him by name, which de-individualizes the latter (Fuchs 167-71). Additionally, the torturer reflects that “he liked to work on people he didn’t know, people around whom he could create all sorts of evil tales” (*Dew Breaker* 187).

These tales enable the dew breaker to swap roles and create a heroic self-image that hides the arbitrary and senseless violence and brutality that he uses just because he is in the position to do so. For instance, he talks himself into believing that

[i]n slaying the preacher, . . . he would actually be *freeing* an entire section of Bel-Air, men, women, and children who had been brainwashed. . . . He’d be *liberating* them, he reasoned, from a Bible that had maligned them, pegged them as slaves, and told them to obey their masters. . . . With their preacher gone, the masses of Bel-Air would be more likely to turn back to their ancestral beliefs, he told himself. . . . (*Dew Breaker* 188; my emphasis)

This act of justifying his motives enables the dew breaker to continue torturing and killing without thinking about it too much. The dew breaker’s anonymity and his practice of regarding his victims as anonymous people allows him to turn them into enemies. Thereby, he euphemizes his actions by concealing his violence beneath terms like “freeing” and “liberating.” Therefore, the dew breaker’s use of language is analogous to his ambiguous name and enables him to create a distance from his own violence and thereby to continue

physician (Jessup 170). James Ferguson writes that the name “Papa Doc” was a common description for Haitian presidents who “have often been given familiar titles such as ‘Papa’ . . . as a reflection of the curious mixture of authority and paternalism which surrounds the office” (39). Duvalier made use of his reputation and gave himself the position of a dictatorial father that granted him limitless power (Conwell).

¹⁶ The dew breaker is not the only perpetrator in the book. We learn that Léon the shoeshine man’s son is also a *Tonton macoute*. The other perpetrators include Emmanuel Constant, Claude, and Regulus (*Dew Breaker* 79, 142).

it. This practice is intensified further by the euphemistic ambiguity of his assumed identity as M. Bienaimé.

A Man Well-Loved

After escaping to the U.S. with his future wife Anne, the dew breaker chooses the name “Bienaimé” in order to live in the U.S. anonymously and to conceal his identity.¹⁷ This name is ironic because the dew breaker uses it after escaping from those who do *not* love or like him, from the dictatorial regime whose orders he disobeyed and from his former victims who might want to take revenge. Thus, the chosen name hides a man that embodies its exact opposite and implies the dew breaker’s hope for a future in which he will be *well loved* and liked instead of being held accountable for his deeds since “the name carries the properties of the name bearer” (Allan and Burridge 50). By ironically inverting the fact that he is not well loved, the euphemistic name helps him to hide his past from himself, his wife, and his daughter, and it enables him to lead an almost normal life as a loving husband and father.

The dew breaker wants to be transformed from a torturer to a well-loved man through “the transformative power of naming and its ability to dramatically alter identity through manipulative nomenclature” (Mehta 74). However, Danticat shows that this strategy of silencing the negative connotation of the euphemism fails, and she lets the dew breaker unmask himself. The dew breaker can no longer live with his lie when he sees his daughter’s sculpture of him as an innocent prisoner, the father she loves. The sculpture can be read as the visualization of the dew breaker’s euphemistic name. Ka used “a piece of mahogany that was naturally flawed, with a few superficial cracks along what was now the back. I’d thought these cracks beautiful and had made no effort to sand or polish them away, as they seemed like the wood’s own scars, like the one my father had on his face” (*Dew Breaker* 7). For Ka, the cracks as a symbol of her father’s scar stand for his victimhood and his suffering, “the only visible reminder of the year he spent in prison in Haiti” (5), while they actually stand for his guilt as a torturer. Being confronted with this grotesque inversion of his true identity causes the dew breaker to confess who he really is.

In its English translation, *beloved*, the dew breaker’s adopted name “Bienaimé” is an intertextual reference to Toni Morrison’s famous novel *Beloved* (1987). In Morrison’s novel, the title is also the name of one of the protagonists. Sethe, a slave, kills her baby daughter Beloved rather than letting her former master have her.¹⁸ Sethe’s love is so strong that she prefers to kill her child, so that love and death become inextricable. In contrast to Sethe, the dew breaker tries to hide death and his murders behind his love for his wife and daughter. While Morrison’s protagonist Sethe is a victim of violence who only becomes violent out of fear, desperation, and love, Danticat’s dew breaker is a former perpetrator who has to come to terms with his past violence that he has repressed for a long time. However, the dew breaker might not be so much different from Sethe after all. He did not become a

¹⁷ We first read the name Bienaimé as Ka’s last name (*Dew Breaker* 3). Interestingly, it constitutes another intertextual reference to Roumain’s novel, *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, since Bienaimé is the first name of Manuel’s father.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the complex phenomenon of infanticide, see Antoinette Marie Sol and Marjorie Stone.

torturer intentionally or because he wanted to torment people. Rather, in the last story chapter "The Dew Breaker," the reader learns that the dew breaker was lured into the dictator's service after his henchmen took away his parents' land. As a result, "his father had gone mad and his mother had simply disappeared" (191). Having lost everything, the dew breaker joins the "Miliciens, the Volunteers for National Security, at nineteen" (191).

Just as Sethe was driven to kill her child by the system of slavery, the dew breaker becomes a killer under the repressive Duvalier regime. Thus, the connection between the dew breaker and Sethe shows how the Haitian dictatorship continues structures of oppression as relics of coloniality¹⁹ and thereby carries on a long history of inequality until the present. By establishing this link, Danticat criticizes the lingering violence and oppression of the Duvalier dictatorship that has continued in its aftermath and that must not be euphemized beneath an image of an independent Haiti that is proud of being the first black republic. The dictator becomes a representative of coloniality and embodies one of its manifestations after independence from colonialism and the abolition of slavery. The complex associations connoted with the names "Bienaimé" and the "dew breaker" show how important it is to be aware of both positive and negative connotations. If one avoids violence and death in favor of positive associations, one runs the risk of forgetting and silencing violence in the course of history, which might lead to its repetition (in this case, the repetition of brutal dictatorship and neo-colonial structures).²⁰ In addition, in order to avoid reductionism and simplifications, it is important not to neglect the perpetrators' humanity and their ability to love and be loved.

As Danticat's story cycle demonstrates, this complexity can be addressed and aesthetically expressed by literature. Constantly renegotiating the past in relation to the present as historiography "engages us both as actors and narrators" (Trouillot 150). Thus, euphemisms are an aesthetic means to express the complexity between opposites such as beauty and violence, victim and perpetrator, good and evil. By using this strategy as a way of reading Haitian history in Danticat's story cycle, it becomes possible to refrain from blaming certain groups for Haiti's misery and to detect its causes in a complex history shaped by coloniality. This history is strongly entangled with the West and its colonial and imperial enterprises in the course of modernity. The more complex approach to history through the analysis of euphemisms is reinforced by examining Danticat's euphemistic use of the dew as a tribute to and a renegotiation of the work of her literary forefather, the Haitian writer, militant communist, and activist Jacques Roumain (1907-44).

¹⁹ *Colonialidad* ("coloniality") is a concept introduced by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, with which he describes the mechanism behind colonialism. It is important to distinguish the terms *colonialism* and *coloniality*, since *coloniality* is the ideological pattern behind the political manifestation of colonialism that exists until the present day (Quijano 12, 19).

²⁰ The act of naming crimes also points to the necessity of knowing the horror in order to enable justice for victims and the persecution of perpetrators and to prevent future recurrences. The topicality of this idea becomes prevalent in the Haitian president Martelly's avoidance of persecuting the former dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier by emphasizing amnesty over persecution. By doing this, Martelly has euphemized the dictator's past crimes and enraged Duvalier's victims (Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International).

Danticat and Roumain: Renegotiating the Dew

The dew can be read as a positive, poetic image that Danticat uses as an intertextual allusion to the 1944 Haitian classic *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*) by Roumain. In her essay collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat writes that she “tried to maintain a silent conversation with Jacques Roumain that publicly manifested itself in the title of . . . *The Dew Breaker*” (61). Roumain’s novel describes the Haitian landscape with indigenist imagery.²¹ He uses the image of the dew in a strictly positive sense as a means of describing the beginning of a new national consciousness in Haiti after the end of the U.S. occupation in 1915. Furthermore, the dew in *Gouverneurs de la rosée* is linked to the image of water. The novel describes how the small Haitian community of Fonds Rouge suffers from lack of water and fights for survival. The village is divided resulting from a conflict between members of an extended family, which prevents them from working together and finding water. Thus, water stands for both survival and the community’s reconciliation as “pour la distribution de l’eau[,] . . . le besoin de chaque nègre” (Roumain 127). Beyond this immediate conflict, Roumain links the dew as a water image to mastery, that is, mastery in terms of self-governance and independence (Fuchs 189-99).

Danticat both pays tribute to her literary predecessor and breaks with this tradition by exposing the dew not only as a sustaining positive image, but also as a euphemism for death and violence, “a brutal inversion” (Mehta 68) of Roumain’s image of a harmonious nature and the communist utopianism of society’s common economic progress. In Danticat’s disillusioned representation of the Duvalier era and its aftermath, unpunished violence and death can no longer be hidden behind the beauty of nature and the hope for a better future. However, Danticat does not completely reject Roumain’s ideas, but inserts stark contrasts between the positive connotations of dew as a new beginning and violence, which can be analyzed by reading the ambiguity of the dew as a euphemism.

When Dany, one of the dew breaker’s victims, returns to Haiti, he celebrates the beauty of the Haitian landscape in the indigenist tradition: “Low shrubs covered in dew brushed against his ankles as he made his way down a trail toward the stream at the bottom of the fall. The water was freezing cold when he slipped in, but he welcomed the sensation of having almost every muscle in his body contract, as if to salute the dawn” (99). Here, the dew is the image of a new beginning, a new dawn. The water reawakens him from the traumatic stupor that he has been trapped in since his parents’ murder. However, Danticat immediately contrasts this beautiful experience with death. The dew and the refreshing

²¹ Indigenism is a literary tradition that developed in Haiti after the American occupation in 1915. It was a means of resistance against both the American invaders and against local elites by which writers identified with their African heritage and created a Haitian aesthetic in order to erect “a sense of place that had long been absent in Haitian writing” (Munro, *Exile* 15). Indigenism implied a shift in Haitian thought from a perception of fragmentation toward a feeling of national unity and consciousness (Munro, *Exile* 13). Even if it is a twentieth-century movement, indigenism must be regarded in the context of the Haitian revolution. In his Proclamation of Independence, Jean-Jacques Dessalines “indexes some positive criteria for Haitianness, notably in its frequent references to Haitians as ‘indigenes’ and its figuration as liberation from slavery as a moment of collective rebirth within the ‘empire of freedom’” (Garraway 6). Deborah Jenson has called this a “traumatic indigeneity of lost homelands” (232) as “an early attempt to ‘make sense of diaspora’” (234).

water of the fall make him think of his dead parents who were killed by the dew breaker, so that he asks himself: "Had his father ever bathed in this stream? Had his parents soaked here together. . . ? But lately what was taking up the most space in his mind was not the way his parents had lived but the way they had died" (99). The image of survival is not what Danticat's story cycle is concerned with most, but rather how one can come to terms with the trauma caused by violence and death.

The dew breaker's daughter Ka goes even further and links the beauty of the Haitian landscape to blood. She exposes the negative connotation of dew as a euphemism that its poetic sound tries to hide. The potential buyers of her statue tell her and her father that they return to Haiti every year to a place where "the rain is sweeter, the dust is lighter, our beaches prettier" (29) and where "[t]here's nothing like sinking your hand in sand from the beach in your own country" (30). Ka, who has never been to Haiti, only thinks of her father's nightmares, and she contrasts her host's beautiful image with a counter-image of her father. She imagines him dipping "his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and find[s] that what he comes up with is a fistful of blood" (30).²² The sweetness, lightness, and prettiness of Haiti cannot hide the violence and death represented by the blood, and Haiti is entangled inextricably with its violent history in *The Dew Breaker*. As a result, as a tribute to Roumain, Danticat's story cycle exposes the euphemistic ambiguity of the dew as a sustaining image of life and new beginnings on the one hand. On the other hand, the dew in *The Dew Breaker* represents the blood shed by the victims of torture and dictatorial violence.

Danticat expands Roumain's image of the dew to a complex euphemistic metaphor characterized by the tension between life and death, hope and despair, new beginnings and an apocalyptic ending. This literary strategy reflects the necessity of finding new means of expression for the complexity of violence as a reaction to new forms of exploitation, neo-colonialism, and coloniality. The blood imagery thereby also refers to geopolitics and describes what Gloria Anzaldúa calls "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). Mignolo adopts Anzaldúa's image and describes the "colonial wound" that, "physical and/or psychological, is a consequence of *racism*, the hegemonic discourse that questions the humanity of all those who do not belong to the locus of enunciation (and the geo-politics of knowledge) of those who assign the standards of classification and assign to themselves the right to classify" (*Idea* 8; emphasis in original). Thereby, the dew as a euphemistic metaphor in *The Dew Breaker* represents the long and complex history of violence in Haiti from colonial times to the present, and it links the oppressive structures installed by the colonizers to the dictatorial regime that has caused the dew breaker's acts of torture and killings.

Thus, the bloodshed in *The Dew Breaker* as the negative connotation of dew must be read in the context of the on-going violence that has resulted from a history of colonialism, neo-colonial occupation, and a hierarchical political power structure resumed by local elites that culminated in the Duvalier era.²³ In the course of this development, the

²² For other allusions to blood in the novel, see *The Dew Breaker* 153, 146-47, 172, and 179 and Fuchs 193-94.

²³ The Haitian elite is, of course, far from a homogeneous group that perpetuated colonial structures. This

manifestations of violence have become more obscure because the aggressor was no longer a colonial or neo-colonial power and resistance was no longer directed at an easily defined enemy but rather against internal conspiracies (Munro, "Hatred Chérie" 164). Danticat, therefore, acknowledges the necessity of pointing to these complex entanglements and to the fact that history is being euphemized, which the Haitian critic Trouillot has called "silencing the past." In spite of this negative connotation, Danticat's allusions to a euphemized historiography also imply the chance and hope for a new beginning as a constant re-evaluation of the past by looking beneath euphemisms and historiographic manipulations.

Danticat expresses this necessity for new historiographic beginnings in *The Dew Breaker* by arguing that many torturers under the Duvaliers have never been charged for their crimes and have begun new lives in the U.S. unperturbedly. Apart from the dew breaker himself, the story cycle mentions the actual torturer Emmanuel Constant. Danticat describes a flyer of Constant in Brooklyn with the heading "WANTED FOR CRIMES AGAINST THE HAITIAN PEOPLE," which accuses him of "torture, rape, murder of 5,000 people" (*Dew Breaker* 78). However, in the story, the flyer as a reminder of Constant's horrible deeds and as motivation of putting him on trial fades:

... the letters and numbers started disappearing so that the word rape became ape and the 5 vanished from 5,000, leaving a trio of zeros as the number of Constant's casualties. The demonic-looking horns that passersby had added to Constant's head and the Creole curses they'd scribbled on the flyer were nearly gone too, turning it into a fragmented collage with as many additions as erasures. (79)

These changes and erasures on the flyer are reminiscent of the euphemistic misrepresentations, manipulations, and fragmentations of historiographers and of the dew breaker's initial misrepresentation of himself as an innocent victim toward his daughter. Thereby, Danticat points to the fact that historiography is full of erasures and additions in the form of euphemistic misrepresentations that we must not accept blindly as facts without critically challenging them.

Danticat's story cycle *The Dew Breaker* is characterized by a tension between poetic beauty and violence, which can be particularly well observed in her use of euphemisms as an aesthetic means of expressing the contradictoriness of violence and trauma. The deliberate use of euphemisms in all their ambiguity both hides traumatic experiences and

heterogeneity is already founded in Haiti's proclamations of the revolution that "betray a significant tension between universalism and particularism, and between transnationalism and nationalism, as the ideological basis of the Haitian statehood" (Garraway 5-6). The Haitian elite, for example Pompée Valentin de Vastey who advocated the legitimacy of Henry Christophe's regime, can be read as contradictory. On the one hand, he is an anticolonial intellectual who uses "philosophical arguments about racial equality and the humanity of blacks in an effort to stir up international opposition to slavery and the slave trade and to promote more humane forms of colonization" (Garraway 12). On the other hand, his writings are characterized by "an equally vehement social and political conservatism symptomatic of the interests of a new, self-serving elite" (Garraway 12-13). For more on forms of Haitian authoritarianism and the distinction of the Haitian Revolution, see Doris L. Garraway. For more on Vastey's contradictory status as both a Haitian statesman and his loyalty to France and its implied privileges, see Marlene L. Daut.

exposes them. This strategy helps to convey unspeakable traumatic experiences by initially providing a distance to them and then contributing to finding new ways of healing. Both positive and negative aspects of euphemisms persist, which the meanings of the dew breaker's name and character illustrate. The poetic beauty of the dew as a tribute to Roumain manifests itself on the book's cover and hides aspects of violence. Danticat expands this effect to the dew breaker as a character who lies about his identity and past and who anonymously lives in U.S. exile. Nevertheless, his violence that caused his victims' and his own traumas and sufferings are the true theme of the story cycle, with which Danticat aims at finding new, indirect ways of expressing pain and trauma as detours.

Above all, *The Dew Breaker* points to the necessity to continue speaking about violence in order to prevent historiographic additions and erasures from turning into fact and "silencing the past." We need to examine euphemistic language in all its complexity as a link between language and power. Euphemisms here allude to and deliberately expose institutional abuses of language by those in power who try to hide and silence violence in order to stabilize and maintain their positions. Thereby, Danticat's use of euphemisms becomes an act of resistance against the oppressive power structures of coloniality from colonial times to the aftermath of the Duvalier dictatorships. In contrast to their euphemistic use of language that tries to silence negative connotations by emphasizing positive ones, Danticat keeps up the tension between hiding and exposing negative connotations. She portrays the dew breaker in a complex way as both a loving and a violent man and the dew as an image of both survival and death. Thereby, her euphemistic language does not reduce situations, but keeps their complexity intact by using the full ambiguous range of euphemisms so that supposed opposites can coexist. In addition, these acts of balancing positive and negative connotations reflect the challenge and necessity of further exposing silenced acts of violence in history. It is essential to express past traumatizations and renegotiate historiographic representations in order to avoid future repetitions of violence. That is why it is particularly important to focus on the negative meanings of euphemisms that are hidden beneath positive associations and link them to power relations.

The trauma caused by the Haitian dictatorial violence during the Duvalier era and connected to structures of coloniality has not yet healed. In her work, Danticat constantly points to the necessity of finding new means of coming to terms with this heritage that is passed on from generation to generation. However, rather than merely focusing on violence and death, her fiction emphasizes love as its opposite, which may have the potential to prevent revenge and more violence in the future. The positive connotations of the dew need to persist as well since they imply a hope for a better future without which it is hardly possible to break the circle of violence. As history has produced new forms of violence, new and more complex forms to represent it become necessary. Danticat's use of euphemisms in *The Dew Breaker* has demonstrated this vividly.

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