SCARRED BODIES, SCARRED WRITING: THE TRAUMA OF DICTATORSHIP AND DIASPORA IN THE DEW BREAKER AND THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

By

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To my family
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For authors Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz, the body is central to understanding dictatorship and diaspora—two central threads in the national histories of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In this essay, I will argue that Danticat and Díaz use trauma to the body to illustrate the trauma associated with dictatorship and diaspora in *The Dew Breaker* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, respectively. Bodily traumas range from torture to excessive weight gain in both novels. While trauma scholars theorize that the scar represents healing, Danticat complicates that notion as her title character, a former prison guard under the Duvalier regime, is still troubled by his past despite the scar on his face. Díaz further complicates that idea by connecting scars to the fukú curse, the legacy of colonialism and dictatorship in the Caribbean. Both authors demonstrate that relief from trauma is only achieved by a willingness to speak into the silences that dictatorship and diaspora impose.
CHAPTER 1
TRAUMA AND LANGUAGE

What is it with writers and dictators? Junot Díaz raises this question in his novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, and Edwidge Danticat raises the question to him during an interview for BOMB Magazine in 2007. Danticat acknowledges that there is an antagonistic dynamic between dictators and writers that makes her recall Carolyn Forche’s poem “The Colonel.” In the poem, a poet goes to dinner at a dictator’s, and at the end, the dictator pours a bag of human ears onto the table as he declares “I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves” (lines 20-21). Danticat interprets the dictator’s actions as an attempt to “take away the power he knew the writer had by attempting to stun her into silence” (Danticat 6). But Díaz interprets the poem somewhat differently. He explains the dictator’s actions as “an implicit challenge,” where he is proclaiming “This is how I write: now what you got?” (Danticat 6). The subtle distinctions in their interpretations of Forche’s poem indirectly speak to the way each of them treat dictatorship and diaspora in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, published in 2006, and Danticat’s novel The Dew Breaker, published in 2004; the former a narrative about a family that falls prey to the dictator’s way of writing on their bodies for generations, the latter a narrative about a guilt-stricken family dealing with one member’s past as a torturer in a dictatorship, stunning his victims into silence with violence. In spite of any differences in their interpretations of Forche’s poem, both authors agree that the body is central to understanding the dictatorship and diaspora. As I will argue in this thesis, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and The Dew Breaker both illustrate the ways trauma from dictatorship and diaspora metaphorically and physically manifest itself in the body.
In Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the narrator, Yunior, chronicles the tragic story of Oscar Cabral de León, a ghetto nerd in New Jersey, and his family. While Oscar’s mother, Beli, is from the Dominican Republic, Oscar and his sister, Lola, are born in the United States. Despite living in America, post-Trujillo regime, the whole family is haunted by the dreaded fukú, a curse that, according to the author, rose out of the African slave trade and Columbus’s conquest. For this book, the curse’s most famous high priest was Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Molina Trujillo, who served as president of the Dominican Republic officially from 1930-1938 and again in 1942-1952. But Trujillo continued to hold power until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo’s initial curse on Abelard Cabral de León, Oscar’s maternal grandfather, has surmounted the boundaries of time and space to plague Oscar and his family in the United States. Yunior, Lola’s sporadic lover and Oscar’s even more sporadic friend, narrates the tragedy of the Cabral de León family, shifting from the past and present, often unexpectedly, all in an effort, finally, to perform what he calls a zafa, or counter curse.

The importance of personal history is central to Díaz’s novel. Monica Hanna describes Yunior’s storytelling as an “intervention against this official historiography [traditional history of the Dominican Republic],” an intervention that “relies on imagination and invention” and “opposes the univocal voice of nationalistic rhetoric” (504). Dictators eliminate events and people that do not compliment the national narrative they attempt to create. Consequently, “poor dark people,” Díaz explains, “are not usually central to a nation’s self-conception . . . even if these people are in fact the nation itself” (Danticat 2). In building a national history around the Cabral de León family, instead of the dictator, Díaz is challenging dictatorial power and its legacy.
The same can be said for Danticat’s novel. Presented as a series of short stories, *The Dew Breaker* highlights the lives of several members of the Haitian diasporic community in America, post Duvalier-regime. Like Díaz’s novel, family history is at the center of Danticat’s novel. Additionally, like the Cabral de Leóns, the Beiname parents are originally from the Caribbean—Haiti in this instance—while their daughter, Ka, was born in the United States. But unlike the Cabral de Leóns, not all members of Bienaimé family are victims of dictatorship exclusively. The father in the Bienaimé family—who is never named in the whole novel—is a former Haitian prison guard and *chouket lawoze*, a dew breaker. A bridal seamstress in the novel, once a victim of the dew breaker, explains the origin of the euphemism: “They’d break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they’d also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they’d take you away. He was one of them, the guard” (Danticat 131). The bridal seamstress’ story and several other characters’ stories all lead back to Haiti and their memories of the dew breaker—who now lives in New York and makes a living quietly as barber. But just as his victims cannot seem to forget the pain that they have suffered at his hands, he cannot forget the pain he has inflicted on them.

The sources of trauma for the characters from both novels are varied and complex. For example, memories of violence experienced and inflicted, respectively, are the source of Beli and the Dew Breaker’s trauma. On the other hand, for Anne, the dew breaker’s wife, harboring the secrets of others is the source of her trauma. Oscar’s trauma, perhaps the most interesting case of all, stems directly from his own experience in diaspora and indirectly from his family’s experience under dictatorship. Regardless of the origin of the trauma, relocating to or being born in the United States does not
provide relief. In fact, the characters’ experiences in the United States not only exacerbate pre-existing trauma, they create new traumas in the characters’ lives as well.

In one of the most influential works on trauma theory, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience or sudden catastrophic event” that results in the “often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Similarly, Judith Herman notes that “at the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless” and confronted with “the extremities of … terror” (33). Both Herman and Caruth therefore stress that traumatic experiences can create a feeling of a lack of agency in the victim. The lack of agency is not exclusive to how an individual handles trauma; it has significant influence on the way that individual expresses his or her trauma thereafter. Herman claims the most commonplace response to atrocities—trauma caused by other human beings—is to “banish them from consciousness” as some are simply “too terrible to utter aloud” (1). Characters in both novels exhibit that behavior. Beli “embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination”(Díaz 259) to deal with her past trauma, and the dew breaker and his wife, Anne, live in a similar state of amnesia “never delving too far back in time, beyond the night they met” (Danticat 241). Nevertheless, those that do venture to explicate their traumatic experiences often do so in a “highly emotional, contradictory, fragmented manner that undermines their credibility. . . .” (2). Both victims of trauma and witnesses to it find themselves devoid of

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1 In Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History, Cathy Caruth engages and responds to Freud’s theory of trauma in Moses and Monotheism and Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Instead of depicting actual case studies of trauma survivors, Caruth explains her goal is to “explore the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it” (4).
a language that can “convey fully and persuasively what one has seen” (2). Thus, trauma, fundamentally, resists language and active retelling. Elaine Scarry draws a similar conclusion about the relationship between bodily pain and language:

Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language. . . . Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. . . . Its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is. (5)

Consequently, expressing trauma and/or pain becomes a challenge in and of itself. The victim is compelled to forget an experience that reemerges spontaneously and forcefully, with so much force, in fact, that whether it is trauma or physical pain, the victim cannot locate the language to describe what has happened, or as Caruth argues, the experience has destroyed language. Ironically, psychotherapists cite turning a traumatic experience into a narrative as a way to overcome the trauma. How then does one construct a narrative out of trauma and pain when each seems to be inherently opposed to the other?

Kathryn Robson further complicates narrating trauma in her discussion of what experiences can actually be recounted and the level of truth that remains thereafter:

Are there some traumatic experiences that can never fully be recalled and narrated, even in therapy? These questions are even more pressing in light of the massive traumatic events of the twentieth century—the Holocaust, two world wars, genocide, “ethnic cleansing,” the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the list could go on indefinitely. . . . Certain traumatic events seem so unthinkable that they can never become part of a life 

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2 Kathryn Robson cites Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Heart to explain this idea: “Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. When this is achieved, they add, ‘The story can be told, the person can look back at what has happened; he can give it a place in his life history, his autobiography (176).
story….Indeed, if trauma defies narrativization, then any narrative of trauma of traumatic experience will necessarily modify, distort, even fictionalize, that experience. (20)

Had Robson’s list continued, the dictatorships of Trujillo and Duvalier, Haitian president from 1957-1971, would have definitely been included. Both regimes were known for their ruthlessness, corruption and violent oppression of anything that even appeared to be resistance to their rule, especially through censorship of literature and writing. If describing the initial trauma of living under dictatorship was not hard enough to narrate, fear of the consequences of retelling only intensified the difficulty. Trujillo and Duvalier were known to go to great lengths to prevent individuals from narrating the trauma they inflicted on both Dominicans and Haitians³, as was the mysterious case of Jesus de Galíndez⁴. That being said, I would add, the political context of trauma becomes another obstacle in recounting trauma. Political pressure can affect the validity of any narrative of trauma, which Robson aptly points out is already an inherent risk since trauma defies narrative—“any narrative of traumatic experience will necessarily modify, distort, even fictionalize, that experience” (20). Consequently, understanding trauma cannot come from simply reading and analyzing trauma narratives, it necessitates much more.

³ Trujillo’s urgent desire to prevent anyone from writing about the atrocities he committed was not atypical. Judith Herman explains that “the more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is prerogative to name and define reality,” and in Trujillo’s case, nothing could be truer. A megalomaniac, Trujillo most famously renamed the capital city, Santo Domingo, and the highest mountain in the country, Pico Duarte, to Ciudad Trujillo and Pico Trujillo, respectively (Díaz 4). Herman elaborates that “secrecy and silence are the first perpetrator’s first line of defense,” and if the perpetrator is unable to silence the victim, “he tries to make sure no one will listen” (Herman 8).

⁴ In The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Junot Díaz explains the demise of Jesus de Galíndez. A graduate student at Columbia University, Galíndez decided to write his doctoral dissertation on the Trujillo era. Díaz describes Galíndez as a “ferocious leftist… gallantly toiling on his Trujillo dissertation” (11). Allegedly, Trujillo attempted to pay off Galíndez, and when that failed, Trujillo had his henchmen kidnap and murder Galíndez. His body was never found.
In Writing Wounds: The Inscription of Trauma in Post-1968 French Women’s Life Writing, Robson suggests that literary critics look to the wound as an expression of trauma. Robson claims that the bodily wound “stands in for—in effect, speaks for—‘a reality or truth not otherwise available” and is a “double image, signaling injury on the one hand and the gap(s) in our own lack of knowledge of psychic trauma on the other” (14). Narratives of trauma, Robson adds, develop out of a wound, “from a time between injury and healing, a time when the effects of the trauma remain as powerful and as insistent as ever” (31). Although Robson sees the bodily wound as an expression of the enormity of psychic pain, like Scarry, she is careful not to imply that bodily pain is any more communicable than psychological pain. Instead, Robson explains that the bodily wound “offers an image of bodily vulnerability; this image in turn points to the vulnerability and lack of self-containment of the traumatized psyche” (32). For Robson the bodily wound is a starting point, and to explore psychic wounds, she must move past the bodily wound to more complicated bodily figures (32).

Similarly, both Díaz and Danticat recognize the body’s ability to tell stories. As I mentioned previously, personal histories are central to both The Dew Breaker and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. These stories are not told wholly through the actual narratives but also through the characters’ bodies and wounds. Each of these authors has acknowledged the body’s role in narration. In an interview for the Public Eye, Danticat explains how to remain open-minded—she calls it “having your antennas out”—in the most challenging of circumstances: “It’s a privilege having words, having the ability to live with experience rather than to suffer through it, as many people. . . . Those of us who have that privilege are lucky. We get to expel it from ourselves. . . . We
do it with words. We do it with song. We do it with our bodies. . . .” (Coffey 1). Like Robson, Danticat believes that the body is capable of expressing experience. Díaz adds to this idea and contends that understanding the human condition has to start with the body:

And look, nothing reminds us—beyond just any Caribbean nonsense and any sort of old ancient history nonsense—the body is what reminds us on a daily basis that we’re human. The body defies us, it betrays us, we have to struggle with it, you know. And it reveals in curious and in abiding ways how we are not perfect. I think that if you’re writing about the human condition, my God, you’ve got to start at base: point zero, point one, is the body. (Lopez)

Díaz echoes Robson’s point about the vulnerable body. Both these authors find the body essential to narrative, whether it is a narrative of resistance or simply what it means to be human. Intentionally or not, the bodies in their texts narrate so much more. The traumatized bodies in these novels provide insight into dictatorship and diaspora.
CHAPTER 2
THE WEIGHT OF GUILT

Even more than Díaz, Danticat is known for incorporating figures that have undergone trauma into her work. Michael Munro and Heather Hewett have addressed Danticat’s use of traumatic figures in her novel *The Farming of Bones*. The novel pinpoints the experience of one woman, Anabelle, as she tries to recover from personal tragedies—the drowning of her parents—and the political tragedy of the 1937 Dominican massacre of as many as 15,000 Haitians. Hewett describes the historical novel as “filled with wounded and disabled individuals whose marked, scarred bodies prevent them and those around them from forgetting what has happened” (123), and Munro cites the experience of trauma as the “one unifying reality that cuts across all barriers of class, language, color and nationality in the novel” (87). Danticat emphasizes victims’ responses to trauma in *The Farming of Bones*; however, she uses *The Dew Breaker* as an opportunity to shift her focus from the experience of the victim to the experience of the perpetrator of dictatorial violence.

The title character, a former prison guard in Haiti, is most known for two physical features throughout the novel. In America, the dew breaker’s most recognizable feature is a large scar on his face. But in Haiti, he is most known for his large weight. Typically, weight gain and/or loss would not be evidence of political trauma; however, Danticat’s use of weight becomes a central marker of the dew breaker’s political affiliations, or lack thereof. The first significant change in the dew breaker’s weight is directly connected to him joining the Miliciens, the Volunteers for National Security. Before becoming a member, the dew breaker witnessed the same group, ironically, steal his parents’ land to build summer homes (Danticat 191). Stripped of his livelihood, the dew breaker’s
father could only do one thing: Hope that his son would not suffer similar circumstances. He declared that his son would “never work the land, never carry a knapsack on his shoulders or a machete in his hand” (193). The father’s declaration speaks to both the physical and political stature that he wants his son to surpass. As a farm laborer, identity is overshadowed by production. It is not who the body belongs to, but what the body can do that is most important. The body is just as much a tool as the machete for farm laborers. And as such, they have the least political power and practically no political voice whatsoever. In fact, the dew breaker’s father loses his mind after the loss of his land and wife—she is believed to have run off with a former lover—and walks around “naked to the marketplace twice a week, clutching a rock in each fist” (197). The trauma of being stripped of his livelihood and wife leaves the dew breaker’s father voiceless, defenseless, and naked, almost as if he had regressed back to infancy from adulthood. Determined not to suffer the same fate, the dew breaker seizes a portion of political power, one that at least partially manifests itself in weight gain.

Although there is no vivid description of the dew breaker’s physical appearance as a child, one can assume that as a child he is much like the farm laborer—he has little to no political power and/or access. Additionally, even if he wanted to, as a child, he is too small physically to pose a physical threat to the Miliciens. However, at 19 years old, entranced by all of the trappings of one of Papa Doc’s Flag Day speeches, the dew breaker joins the Miliciens. The dew breaker, formerly a victim, has immediately gained access to totalitarian power through his service to the Duvalier regime. His unprecedented power manifests itself in a lifestyle of excess:

His favorite line for them was, ‘I volunteered to protect national security. Unfortunately, or fortunately as you like, this includes your own. . . .’ With
these words, restaurants fed him an enormous amount of food, which he ate eagerly several times a day because he enjoyed watching his body grow wider and meatier just as his sense of power did. A doctor, his landlord, gave him two rooms on the lower floor of a two-story house for free. Bourgeois married women slept with him on the cash-filled mattress in his bedroom floor. Virgins of all castes came and went as well. And the people who had looked down on him and his family in the past, well, now they came all the way from Léogâne to ask him for favors. (196)

Here, there is a direct correlation between the amount of power the dew breaker amasses, pun intended, and his weight. As a member of the famed Miliciens—also known as the *Tonton Macoutes*[^1]—the dew breaker’s power is limitless and unchecked. That power intimidates merchants and landlords into giving him free favors and, at the same time, it attracts and entices women—married and single alike. The locus of power in Haiti is Dictator Francois Duvalier, otherwise known as Papa Doc. Yet, he never makes an appearance in the novel outside of the Flag Day speech scene. His name is never literally mentioned in the novel—the closest reference is “the sovereign one” (193). It is no coincidence that all the people who beg the dew breaker for favors “blasphemously ennobled him ‘Little President’ (196). The dew breaker is the physical embodiment of the Duvalier regime. And just as Duvalier had no political limits, the dew breaker is not limited by finances or institutions like marriage or law—he is bigger than them all. The dew breaker goes from being small physically and politically to larger than any pre-existing institution in Haiti except for Duvalier, appearing the largest to his victims.

The dew breaker’s victims’ accounts make up a significant portion of the novel. The experiences vary from women who had firsthand experiences of torture for rejecting

[^1]: Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier named his volunteer militia after a figure in Haitian mythology. The monster would abduct children who misbehaved at night, put them in his knapsack and carry them away (Danticat 216).
the dew breaker's advances or not revealing the whereabouts of loved ones, to a young man, Dany, who realizes that the barber he rents a room from is the man who murdered his family. Despite the variety of experiences, all of his victims highlight the same detail: the dew breaker's size. Much like the readers, the dew breaker's victims never learn his name. Similar to the faceless villains in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the nameless dew breaker is “a metaphor for the violence and oppression that undergird the modern state” (Mahler 126). As long as the violence and oppression remain hidden and unnamed, the perpetrators remain unpunished and untouchable. As such, the dew breaker's victims can only identify describe him as the fat man with the widow’s peak. Dany remembers seeing a “large man with a face like a soccer ball and a widow’s peak dipping into the middle of his forehead” the night his parents were killed (105). Beatrice Saint Fort, the bridal seamstress, explains to a journalist that “no matter how much he changed, [she] would know him anywhere” (132). A former prisoner of Casernes reports in a documentary that though “she couldn’t remember his name nor could she even imagine what he looked like,” the memory of him was so overwhelming that she could never get him out of her head” (198). The dew breaker's physical size and presence, however, is the most overwhelming for his last prisoner, the preacher.

In an ironic twist, the novel ends with the dew breaker on his last mission to kill a preacher—who turns out to be the brother of his future wife, Anne—who has been speaking out against Duvalier, or “the beast” as he calls him. The entire scene is centered on the juxtaposition of the small preacher and the “fat man”:

The preacher was frankly disappointed when he staggered into the nine-by-twelve foot mustard-colored prison office and forced his bloody, swollen eyes farther apart only to find the same large man who had taken him from the church sitting behind an old desk that took up half the room. . . . The fat
man asked the Voice to bring in a chair. . . . The chair was much lower than the fat man’s desk, and it was obvious that the height and size of the chair were meant to make the preacher feel smaller than the fat who was a whole lot larger than most people anyway…Even though the wobbly metal mustard door was still open, the size of the room made the preacher feel as though it had been suddenly sealed shut. (223)

The emphasis on the dew breaker’s size continues throughout the scene. When the dew breaker stands up, from the preacher’s angle of vision, he looks like “some kind of ambulant mountain on giant feet” (224). As the dew breaker smiles, the preacher notices the dew breaker’s “giant face growing wider with his cheeks spread apart” (225). The dew breaker seems to be growing bigger and bigger as the world around both him and the preacher is getting smaller. Elaine Scarry explains, “The larger the prisoner’s pain [the smaller the prisoner’s world and therefore, by comparison] the larger the torturer’s world” (37). Intense pain, according to Scarry, reduces the world spatially to the victim’s body or to its immediate vicinity; consequently, when the contents of an individual’s world disintegrate, language follows thereafter (35). Stripped of language, the prisoner experiences what Scarry calls an “annihilating negation” (36). Conversely, the torturer experiences an absence of that annihilating negation, so the more the torturer can destroy the prisoner’s world, the larger the torturer and his world become (36). The dynamic between the preacher and the dew breaker echoes that idea. The longer the preacher is held captive, the greater the dew breaker’s presence and size becomes. Even the dew breaker’s voice, in the preacher’s “much-pounded-on ears,” fills up the room and sounds as if he is “speaking from inside a bucket” (224). Confined to a little, wooden chair in the room, afflicted by blood-sucking insects digging into his skin, the preacher is helpless as the physical world shrinks in comparison the dew breaker. Even when the dew breaker extends his hand to help the preacher out of the small
chair, the preacher believes it is a subtle torture method, where the dew breaker pretends to “relieve your discomfort so you’d feel grateful to him and think he was on your side” (224). But, in a swift move of desperation, the preacher shifts the power from the dew breaker to himself.

After pushing back against the wooden chair, steadily moving away from the dew breaker’s hand, the preacher breaks the chair into several pieces. The preacher picks up one of the pieces of wood and cuts the dew breaker’s face, the result of which is the ropelike scar on his face. In that moment, the preacher has the upper hand over the dew breaker. But this one moment destroys the dew breaker’s world. As Scarry continues:

> Just as all aspects of the concrete structure are inevitably assimilated into the process of torture, so too the contents of the room, its furnishings, are converted into weapons. . . . The room, both in its structures and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the face of civilization, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed. . . . That is, in the conversion of a refrigerator into a bludgeon, the refrigerator disappears; its disappearance objectifies the disappearance of the world (sky, country, bench) experienced by a person in great pain; and it is the very fact of its disappearance, its transition from a refrigerator into the bludgeon that inflicts the pain. (40-41)

The very item that was meant to cause the preacher pain and make him seem insignificant has become a tool of resistance for the preacher. Perhaps what is most surprising is that using “normal” items as torture instruments is the dew breaker’s M.O. He tied concrete blocks to ciseral ropes and “balance[d] them off their [prisoners]

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2 Although the preacher is right suspect the dew breaker of trickery, what he doesn’t know is the dew breaker has been ordered to release the preacher. The Duvalier regime wanted the preacher killed in the street, not arrested for fear it would make the preacher into “some kind of martyr” (218). There is no guarantee that the preacher would not be killed another day, but Rosalie, the dew breaker’s superior, declared that “under no circumstances should he [the preacher] die here” (218).
testicles if they were men or their breasts if they were women (Danticat 198). He also
enjoyed “stapling clothespins” to his prisoners’ ears after they lost a game of zo or bezik
and “removing them as he let them win, convincing them that their false victories would
save their lives” (198). The dew breaker uses both the clothespins and the cards to
induce pain. The dew breaker uses the loss of a card game as motivation for physical
cruelty, similar to the way that interrogation is “repeatedly credited with being the motive
for torture” (Scarry 28). However, Scarry contends that “just as the motive for punishing
those imprisoned is often a fiction . . . so what masquerades as the motive for torture is
a fiction” (28), as is the case with the meaningless card games. But this time the
preacher has, unknowingly, used the dew breaker’s methods against him. Fully
intending to release the preacher, the dew breaker’s massive body is left vulnerable.
The preacher does more than cut the dew breaker’s face; he completely, to quote
Scarry, undoes the dew breaker’s whole world from that point on.

While the preacher undoes the dew breaker’s world theoretically, it costs him his
life literally. The dew breaker pulls out his .38 and shoots the preacher repeatedly.
Having disobeyed his orders, the dew breaker realizes that being arrested or executed
were real possibilities for him. Always the hunter, the dew breaker could become prey.
His fear of the consequences for murdering the preacher causes him to flee the prison
and vomit “as if his retching would never stop” (230). He not only feared what the
regime would do to him but also what former prisoners might do to him. After running
into a woman outside the prison, the dew breaker hopes she isn’t “someone he’d
harmed or nearly killed, someone who’d been in the torture chamber adjacent to his
office, for he wanted sympathy, compassion from her” (231). The woman—the
preacher’s stepsister Anne—takes care of the dew breaker, and the two are on a flight
to New York together the next day. Anne is unaware that the man she is taking care of
has just murdered her brother. She asks the dew breaker what happened to him in the
prison, and he replies “I am free. I finally escaped” (237). Anne believes for several
years that he was a prisoner in the jail until he reveals that he was actually a guard. But
with regard to the preacher, the dew breaker “endorsed the public story, the one that the
preacher had killed himself,” and Anne “accepted that he had only arrested him and
turned him over to someone else” (241). Each of them prefers to live in denial than to
confront the truth. Their relationship is what the narrator calls a “benevolent
collaboration, a conspiratorial friendship . . . a more strained attachment” (240) that
became a marriage and a family. Living as a married man in New York, with one
daughter, Ka, the dew breaker's body undergoes a major transformation.

As I have noted, from the very first page of the novel, the dew breaker’s body is
central to understanding the plot of The Dew Breaker. On a trip to deliver one of Ka’s
sculptures to a famous, potential client, the dew breaker goes missing. Ka, obviously
fearful, reports her father missing to the police and the hotel manager and describes
him as “sixty-five, five feet eight inches, one hundred and eight pounds, with a widow's
peak, thinning salt-and-pepper hair and velvet brown eyes . . . deep brown, same colors
as his complexion” (4). This is a stark contrast from the man in Haiti, the fat man with
the giant face and overwhelming presence. She also mentions that he has partial
frontal dentures and “ropelike scar that runs from [her] father’s right cheek down to
corner of his mouth,” which, at the time, she believes is “the only visible reminder of the
year he spent in prison in Haiti” (5). The scar on the dew breaker’s face directly adds to
Robson’s idea that the narrative trauma originates in the wound—this narrative of trauma begins with a scar. By her logic, it is the open wound, and not the scar, that represents a “time between injury and healing, a time when the effects of trauma remain as powerful and insistent as ever” (28). Conversely, Robson explains the scar, metaphorically, “points to a story of wounding and healing, a past that can be remembered yet left behind” (28). In spite of appearing “healed”, the dew breaker is still, ironically, experiencing trauma from his past. Ka mentions her father’s partial dentures when describing him to the police and hotel managers; however, she leaves out the fact that his teeth were broken when “he fell out of bed and landed on his face after a prison nightmare” (4). Thus, to echo Junot Díaz’s point, the body finds a way to defy and betray itself. The scar implies that the dew breaker's past wounds have healed, yet his behaviors say otherwise. His trauma stems from the guilt he feels for the crimes he has committed. But that trauma is exacerbated by an overwhelming fear that he will punished for them.

Anne shares the overwhelming fear of punishment. At a Christmas Mass, Ka sees someone who she thinks is Emmanuel Constant, a former leader of the Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti. He is wanted for the torture, rape and murder of 5,000 Haitians during his tenure in the militia. The more irate Ka gets about Constant evading punishment for his crimes, the more Anne’s shame grows. She realizes that she “didn’t have the same freedom to condemn as her daughter did” primarily because of the “shame and guilt she’d inherited by marrying her husband” whose crimes were separated from Constant’s by only 30 years. Overcome by their guilt, the dew breaker and his wife exhibit the traditional response to trauma: suppression. Ka recounts that
her parents “never speak of any relatives in Haiti or anywhere else” or “taught [her] anything about the country” (21) beyond what she could get access to. Anne and the dew breaker are actively attempting to suppress their personal memories; but they also take it a step further. Herman explains that individuals who inflict trauma on others will do anything they can to tarnish the credibility of the victim. If done successfully, the perpetrator can evade having to taking responsibility or being punished. The dew breaker and his wife don’t attempt to discredit victims; instead, they alienate themselves from everyone else, narrate their own story, and cast the dew breaker as the victim, not the perpetrator. Ka is raised her whole life to believe that her father was a prisoner back in Haiti, not a guard. Inadvertently, his wife and daughter have enabled the dew breaker to suppress his past. Anne even admits as much when she explains to Ka that she and her mother “saved him,” and when Anne met him, that made him stop hurting people. They have been shields that keep him from confronting his past as a murderer and allow him to “masquerade” as a meek barber, father and husband. The scar on his face may hint at healing, but one unexpected object brings the past rushing back to the dew breaker and his family.

As I mentioned, the purpose of the trip that Ka and her father are on is to show one of Ka’s sculptures to a potential client. Ka admits that the sculpture is meant to be a representation of “the way she imagined him [her father] in prison” (7):

A three-foot mahogany figure . . . 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. . . . I’d 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. (6-7)
Ka’s intention with the statue is to honor her father; however, the statue puts the dew breaker to shame. And in that shame, he steals the statue from their hotel room and throws it in a lake (15). This scene speaks to the scene where the dew breaker kills the preacher—perhaps foreshadows it since it comes first in the novel. Similar to the small chair that the preacher sat in, the purpose of the statue gets misconstrued. The little chair was meant to restrain the preacher, and the statue was meant to honor the dew breaker; however, each one ended up causing the dew breaker pain—the former physical pain and the latter psychological pain—and undoing his world. The blow from the preacher was the catalyst for the dew breaker’s decline in power in Haiti. Now, the image of the sculpture has disrupted the reality the dew breaker has created for himself as a lowly barber in New York. The dew breaker cannot see himself in the statue as Ka intends; instead, his victims are forcefully brought back to his consciousness in the figure of the statue. Being forced to remember his victims provokes a flood of emotion that include, I argue, shame, guilt and repentance.

The dew breaker’s drastic weight change is a personal testimony that speaks to a much larger historical context. The dew breaker’s ascent to power as a member of the Miliciens is a journey littered with bodies. Some of those bodies are used for sex, others used for torture and some bodies just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Regardless of their purpose, these bodies represent the canvases on which members of a dictatorship can display their excessive power. And as such, the body in such a context becomes, to echo Corrine Duboin when she cites Pierre Nora, a “lieux de memoire, emblematic representation or symbolic site where collective memory ‘crystallizes and secretes itself’” (287). Despite the differences in their encounters, the
dew breaker’s victims all speak to a national, historical moment in Haiti. The dew breaker’s own body does the same thing as his weight becomes symbolic of the overwhelming power and excessive lifestyle of the leaders of the Duvalier regime. But just as the dictatorship lost its power, so does the dew breaker. The dew breaker was once a large man who slept on a mattress filled with money, and now he is a thin, meek barber in New York with little to no political access. Instead, Egyptian myths about the afterlife weigh down the dew breaker’s thoughts. He believes that he is similar to the Egyptian statues in the Brooklyn Museum missing “eyes, noses, legs, sometimes even heads” (Danticat 19). He anticipates the punishment in the afterlife that he has managed to escape his whole life thus far. While the power of dictatorship caused the dew breaker’s body to swell in Haiti, the almost literal weight of guilt overwhelms the dew breaker’s mind and body as he desperately hopes there is redemption and forgiveness for his past.
CHAPTER 3
HEAVY HEARTS AND BROKEN BODIES

While the dew breaker’s trauma stems from a combination of guilt and overwhelming fear of potential punishment, the Cabral de Leóns’ trauma stems from a legacy of dictatorial violence, one manifestation the fukú curse, according to Yunior. Yunior explains that “the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world,” but, according to him, the fukú “ain’t just ancient history” considering no one mastered the fukú better than Dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (Díaz 12). Yunior explicitly connects the Trujillo dictatorship to the legacy of colonialism, a legacy built in part on the power and processes hegemonic masculinity. As a dark-skinned woman and an overweight, nerdy male, Beli and Oscar, respectively, fall outside the realm of hegemonic masculinity. Consequently, the dictatorial figures in the novel locate Beli and Oscar’s otherness in their bodies and use that to oppress them. For example, Beli’s body is used and misused sexually as a site to establish masculinity, and Oscar is constantly confronted by figures of hegemonic masculinity and pressured to conform to such standards. Ironically, Beli and Oscar have parallel experiences with violence in dictatorship and diaspora, all rooted in trauma to the body.

Beli’s life is plagued with trauma from the very beginning, partly because of her dark skin. Her dark skin was viewed as a bad omen, and as Monica Hanna highlights,” her blackness is precisely what Trujillo was trying to get exclude[d] from the nation” (515). Additionally, Beli was a sickly baby “who had problems crying [and] problems nursing” (Díaz 252) After losing her family to “mysterious” deaths1, Beli is shipped to

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1 Beli’s older sister, Astrid, is killed while praying in a church when a bullet hits her in the head, and Beli’s oldest sister, Jackie, “commits suicide” in her family’s pool just three days before she was scheduled to leave for medical school in France. All deaths are believed to be a result of the fukú (246-249)
one extended family member and sold to another family until her father’s cousin, La Inca, rescues her. But by the time La Inca retrieves Beli, significant damage has already been done. In a fight with her new parents, her “father” splashed hot oil on Beli’s back. The resulting burns and wounds left her with a “monster glove of festering ruination extending from the back of her neck to the base of her spine . . . a bomb crater, a world-scar like those of a hibakusha” (Díaz 257). Hanna explains that such a description “likens her back to the landscape of war and the scars of the survivors of the Atomic bomb dropped on Japan,” and her scar is “tangentially tied to a larger national violence . . . because she lost her family at the hands of the dictatorial regime”(505).

Anne Mahler adds that the bomb crater from the atomic-bomb droppings and Beli’s scar “testify to the violent severity of the fukú’s strike on the family” (126). Beli’s scarring and burning is an extension of the larger, state sponsored violence. The burning sensation associated with the scar surfaces throughout Beli’s experiences with the Trujillo regime in the novel. Despite the scar being indirectly connected to the Trujillo regime, ironically, that experience creates a longing for escape that pushes Beli right into the arms of men associated with Trujillo.

For Beli, escape meant a whirlwind romance:

In her favorite Maria Montés daydream, a dashing European of the Jean Pierre Aumont variety (who happened to look exactly like Jack Pujols) would catch sight of her in the bakery and fall madly in love with her and sweep her off to his chateau in France. . . . It’s surprising Beli could think of anything else, what with that heavy rotation of boleros [love songs], canciones [songs] and versos [lyrics] spinning in her head. . . . She stared at the young bravos on the bus, secretly kissed the bread of the buenmosos [handsome men] who frequented the bakery, sang to herself all those beautiful Cuban love songs. (87-88)

Beli is obsessed with being in love. For her, love is the perfect escape from the Dominican Republic, which has become painfully routine. She wanted to leave behind
“dull-ass Bani, sharing a bed with her madre [mother], the inability to buy the dress she wanted, having to wait until she was 15 to straighten her hair, the impossible expectations of La Inca” (80) But her brand of romance only includes a good-looking man with wealth and status. The songs that she listens to not only perpetuate this ideal, but they also uphold heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. Beli’s belief that her escape from Santo Domingo, and (assumedly) resulting happiness, is contingent on the male body reveals the uneven gender politics of dictatorship and, more widely, popularized hegemonic masculinity. Within the Trujillo and Duvalier dictatorships, it is very difficult for women, in particular, to maintain wealth and status independently, let alone maintain it\(^2\). In most cases, women simply become another space for men to assert their power through sexual domination and violence. Both of Beli’s lovers, Jack Pujols and the Gangster, use her body for this purpose and leave Beli more broken than before.

Beli’s first love, Jack Pujols, was the blue-eyed, blonde-haired son of a colonel in Trujillo’s air force and a former Venezuelan beauty queen. While Beli spent her time fantasizing over him, the most Jack did was ignore her. That was until the summer of their sophomore year when Beli hit puberty. Beli went from a “gangly ibis of a girl” to having a body “that only a pornographer or comic book artist could have designed. . . .” (92-93). Her breasts were “globes so implausibly titanic they made generous souls pity their bearer . . . ” and what Yunior calls a “supersonic culo [ass] that could tear words out of niggers’ mouths. . . . ” (92). Needless to say, Beli caught the attention of everyone

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\(^2\) The women who did have wealth and status were usually married to high ranking officials in the dictatorial regimes, or they were part of these regimes themselves through familial relations. Both Díaz and Danticat include women in the latter category.
in Bani, including Jack. But her sexual encounters with Jack were anything but the romantic fantasies she envisioned:

Let’s just say that she finally understood why the other boys had given him the nickname Jack the Ripio; he had what even she knew to be an enormous penis, a Shiva-sized lingam, a destroyer of worlds. . . . But since she had nothing to compare it to at the time she assumed fucking was supposed to feel like she was being run through with a cutlass. . . . Afterward she tried to embrace him, to touch his silken hair, but he shook off her caresses. Hurry up and get dressed. If we get caught my ass will be in the fire. Which was funny because that’s exactly how her ass felt. (100-101)

Beli’s sexual experiences with Jack were unfulfilling emotionally and physically, and even outright painful. Jack neither gives nor receives affection from Beli; he simply inflicts physical pain on her through sex. Although this type of sexual experience could occur in a number of contexts, the socioeconomic disparities between Jack and Beli suggest the uneven gender and racial politics associated with hegemonic masculinity. Beli stands out at El Redentor as a poor, Black girl on scholarship in a student body where “the majority of the pupils were the white skinned children of the regime’s top ladronazos [big thieves]” (Díaz 83). Jack takes advantage of Beli’s “otherness” and woos her by “giving her rides in his brand new Mercedes and buying her helados [ice creams] with the knot of dollars he carried in his pocket” (98). Jack is not even old enough to drive, but as the son of a colonel in the Trujillo regime, Jack has privileges and access to resources that Beli can never have because of her marginal political position within the dictatorship. Jack lures Beli into a sexual relationship with his displays of wealth, power and a promise of marriage—all the elements in Beli’s fantasy of escape; however, their sexual encounters only happen in broom closets at school. Jack conceals his relationship with Beli, primarily, because he is already engaged—unbeknownst to Beli. Additionally, Beli is not part of the elite class in society, and
having a public relationship with her would be disgraceful to Jack and his family. Jack’s desire to conceal his relationship with Beli is another example of the oppression—this time sexual—that is hidden in a dictatorship. Jack promises to marry Beli, which would be economically and politically advantageous for Beli, only in an effort to use her for his own sexual pleasures. His actions parallel the way dictators use nationalistic rhetoric to disguise their own totalitarian agenda and commit crimes. After being caught having sex in school, Beli is expelled from El Redentor, but Jack only receives a beating and is sent to a military school. Beli never goes back to school, while Jack escapes shame and most of the punishment, largely in part because of his father’s political position. Lacking political or economic agency, Beli is susceptible to exploitation from dictatorial figures under the guise of commitments of love—Jack being the first, the Gangster being the last.

Sex might have meant pleasure for Jack, but for the Gangster, it was all business. Once a member of Trujillo’s Secret Police, the Gangster operated his own chain of brothels in the Santo Domingo. He was known as the “Caracaracol of Culo,” and imported the women from Venezuela, Colombia, and his favorite place, Cuba. But after the unexpected fall of Cuban dictator and the rise of Castro to power, the Gangster was forced to flee Cuba. His departure did not just have financial consequences; it affected his manhood in that he “could still not accept the fact that country had fallen to a rabble of scurvied students” (Díaz 23). Still devastated by the Cuban affair, Beli becomes an opportunity for the Gangster to redeem himself from the debacle in Cuba. The Gangster could “suck Beli’s enormous breasts…fuck her pussy until it was a mango juice swamp . . . spoil her senseless so that Cuba and his failure there disappeared”
Spoiling Beli and having sex with Beli are opportunities for the Gangster to reassert his masculinity—a masculinity that privileges acquiring and spending wealth and dominating women. Though he showered her with lavish dates and the best sex she ever had, all of it was an effort to rebuild his masculinity and faith in the dominance of the Trujillo dictatorship. During sex, the Gangster would “pass his hand over her naked body, Narcissus stroking that pool of his” (127), which further demonstrates the Gangster’s inability to truly connect with Beli, only seeing himself and his own desire when gazing at Beli. And instead of being repulsed by Beli’s scar, the Gangster compared it to a painting of a ciclón [cyclone] and called Beli his “tormenta en la madruga [storm in the morning]” (127). Corrine Duboin classifies such fascinations with the scarred bodies of women of color as the “eroticization of the unbearable pain inscribed on the black female body” (288). Beli’s body becomes “dismembered and objectified through [the Gangster’s] gaze and touch” (288). The politics of Beli’s body are irrelevant to the Gangster; instead, he erases her otherness in an effort to rebuild his own damaged masculinity. Michael Hardin argues that conquering women is “a sure sign that one [men] had not been penetrated, physically or symbolically” (17). Thus, in conquering Beli sexually, the Gangster can redeem himself from his own symbolic conquering at the hands of the Communists in Cuba. But just like her relationship with Jack, the Gangster’s pleasure could not be achieved without Beli’s pain.

Unbeknownst to Beli, The Gangster was married to Trujillo’s sister, known as La Fea. She had caught wind of Beli and Dionisios’ (The Gangster’s) affair and had discovered that Beli was pregnant with his child. When La Fea tells Beli that she is
going to be taken to have an abortion, the burning sensation returns as Beli feels like “the crone had thrown boiling oil on her” (141). Beli escapes La Fea’s goons’ first attempt to kidnap her, but she isn’t as lucky the second time. La Fea’s goons take Beli to the cane fields and beat her almost to the point of death. Here, even the location of the beating is significant because the cane fields represent the “legacy of colonial oppression under slavery” (Mahler 128). Beli’s beating is another example of torture in that both Beli’s body and her language are casualties. Yunior claims the goons beat Beli to the “end of language, the end of hope” (147). And just as Scarry suggests, Beli’s surroundings become weapons in the torture as the cane “slashed her palms, jabbed into her flank and clawed her thighs, and its sweet stench clogged her throat” (150) as she attempted to escape. Overall, Beli’s injuries included “five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out” (147) and a miscarriage. In a mysterious twist, a mongoose appears to lead Beli out of the cane fields. Yunior explains that the mongoose “accompanied humanity out of Africa . . . [and] has proven to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains and hierarchies . . . an ally of Man” (Díaz 151). Beli was unconscious until the fifth day when she woke up to her arm feeling like “it had been pinched off at the elbow by a grindstone, her head crowned in a burning hoop of brass, her lung like the exploded carcass of a piñata” (153). The recurring feeling of burning links all of Beli’s traumatic experiences. Beli’s body is constantly susceptible to the pain of dictatorship, even in the most intimate moments, even in the farthest of places. Even in America, the fukú afflicts Beli’s body in the form of breast cancer, the body parts that garnered the most attention while she was in the Dominican Republic. Hanna explains that the “ruling principle of the historical trajectory
presented by Yunior is that of love, while a ruling principle of the Trujillan model is that of violence” (504). Even though Yunior is attempting to highlight an alternative history, the violence of the Trujillo regime is just as intrusive in his narrative as it is in the lives of the Cabral de Leóns as it follows them to American and plagues the next generation of the family—Oscar bearing the biggest brunt of it.

As a child, Oscar exudes the most coveted characteristic of traditional, Dominican masculinity: being a “ladies man”. He was one of those “preschool lover boys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic hump. . . .” (1). But, similar to his mother, Oscar’s body changed significantly once he reached puberty. Once the stereotypical “ladies man,” the older Oscar got, the more weight he gained. While his mother peaked in her attractiveness by her sophomore year in high school, at 16, Oscar weighed 245 pounds, 260 at his heaviest, and “had none of the High Powers of your typical Dominican male . . . couldn’t play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks” (18-19).

Oscar’s nerdy interests, overweight body and unattractive looks mark him as an “other,” even within his diasporic community. Yunior points out that “everyone noticed his lack of game and because they were Dominican everybody talked about it” (24). Oscar’s uncle, Rudolfo, encourages him to simply "grab a muchacha y meteselo . . . Coje that fea y meteselo" [grab a girl and put it in her . . . get that ugly girl and put it in her] (24). His sister Lola warns him that he will “die a virgin” unless he starts changing his ways. While Beli reassures Oscar that he only needs to worry about his school work
in his teenage years, when she notices him crying about a girl as a child, she "hauled
Oscar by his ear . . . threw him to the floor" and commanded him to "dale un galletazo
[bitch-slap her] . . . then see if that little puta respects you" (14). Antonio De Moya
explains this behavior as a recurring method of gendering males in Latin American
households:

From early childhood, males are led to become self-conscious about those
verbal and non-verbal behaviors that could lead others to suspect that they
are not true or real males. This self-consciousness which may become
quasi-paranoid by adolescence for non-conforming males, is the product of
an ongoing process of stringent, totalitarian "gender work," orienting
towards the structure of a hegemonic masculinity. (24)

De Moya acknowledges that an individual can be born male, but the veracity of that
masculinity is always subject to question by those around him. His masculinity is never
definite. It is constantly susceptible to critique, even when the criteria are imbalanced.
As such, having sex with an ugly girl can establish Oscar's masculinity, and something
as small as crying over a girl can eradicate it. John Riofrio notes that such gendering
turns the young male into a "well-trained subject 'unconsciously' aware of the 'natural'
rules of masculinity" (26). De Moya adds that the description of this type of gendering
as totalitarian is particularly apt because, as Riofrio points out, "it implies, via the
association of the political, the severity of the consequences engendered by non-
conformity" (26). For Oscar, the consequences are loneliness, isolation and
marginalization. The lack of genuine relationships creates a void in Oscar's life, and
Oscar fills that void with consumption.

In lieu of true friends or a girlfriend, Oscar spends the majority of his time reading
science fiction literature, watching television and eating. Despite Oscar outwardly
enjoying a sedentary life filled with Tolkien and Margaret Weis, Oscar's body
demonstrates the trauma he is experiencing inwardly. After realizing that his only two friends, Al and Miggs, were embarrassed by him, Oscar strips down naked to look at himself in the mirror. He sees "miles of stretch marks" and the "tumescent horribleness of his proportions" (29). The excess stretching and weight Oscar sees are, metaphorically, results of his inability to "fit" into the hegemonic standards of masculinity despite all his efforts. No matter how much food, science fiction or television Oscar consumes, none of it can fill the void. The same holds true for Beli, who watches telenovelas as if they "were the only thing that mattered" (69). Mahler describes Beli and Oscar's over consumption as another layer to the fukú. She explains:

"In this way, the pop culture and the consumption of images constitute, for the characters, a mode of escape or a way to repress the reality of their suffering. However, as consumption forms an integral part of capital power structures, the very mechanism through which Díaz represents the fukú as continuing to exercise its power, the attempts by Oscar and his family members to escape through consumption merely feed the curse's perpetuation." (127)

Popular culture becomes just another method to reinforce hegemonic gender standards. Thus, Beli and Oscar are doubly afflicted. They are victimized by hegemonic masculinity, and then left unfulfilled when they attempt to rectify their suffering with consumption. Unable to alter his circumstances, Oscar rewrites his experiences in an effort to garner the agency he lacks in his own life.

Oscar’s obsessions with being in love caused him heartbreak daily due to the several "secret loves he had all around town" (25). But during his senior year, Oscar genuinely fell for a girl, Ana Obregón, in his SAT prep class. Ana and Oscar develop a close relationship and share a love of books and science fiction. But once Ana reveals that her boyfriend, Manny, is getting out of prison, things change drastically between the two. Outside of Ana's answering machine, Oscar had very little contact with Ana.
When they did talk in person, Ana talked about "how big Manny’s cock was" (42).

Oscar is immediately threatened and insecure. Unable to change Ana’s feelings, he creates a story where he is the hegemonic male, and Manny is the outsider. In Oscar’s narrative, Ana falls for Oscar’s “take-charge genius and his by-then ectomorphic physique” (43) as he saves them both from the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Eventually, Oscar and Ana find Manny “hanging from a light fixture in his apartment . . . his pants around his ankles” with a note on his chest that says “I koona taek it” (43). Oscar uses his writing to alleviate his traumatic experience. In his retelling of the situation between himself, Ana and Manny, Oscar meets several criteria of hegemonic masculinity: intelligence, strength and the ability to attract women. On the other hand, Manny’s suicide becomes a symbol of Manny’s lack of masculinity in that he did not have enough courage to withstand the ensuing danger. Additionally, Manny lacks a command of language and his penis does not draw nearly as much attention in Oscar’s narrative as it did in real life. The lack of attention to Manny’s penis hints at an inability to please or attract women—a characteristic once unique to Oscar. Oscar projects that quality onto Manny. Despite his ability to rewrite scenarios, the pressure to adhere to hegemonic masculinity begins to overwhelm Oscar physically.

Oscar literally writes his way out of his heartbreak with Ana; however, his failed relationship with Jenni at Rutgers is too devastating to rewrite. Jenni and Oscar shared a love of films and literature; but Jenni was in not exclusive with Oscar at all. Consequently, Yunior comes into his and Oscar’s dorm room and finds Oscar face down crying in his bed, most likely because of Jenni. Yunior assumes that Oscar will handle this disappointment like he handles all the others—“a week of mourning and
then back to writing” (186). But this time, Oscar stopped writing completely. Whereas previously Oscar could rewrite his experience, the recurring rejection becomes so overwhelming that Oscar cannot even reimagine the experience, let alone rewrite. During that ten-day period not only does Oscar stop writing, all he does is talk about dreams of oblivion (187). That dream almost becomes reality when Oscar walks in on Jenni having sex with another guy. With Ana, Oscar heard stories of sexual encounters second hand, but seeing Jenni having sex with another man is the ultimate blow to Oscar’s masculinity. After ripping down all the posters on her wall and calling Jenni a whore, Oscar drinks three bottles of Cisco, what Yunior calls “liquid crack” (189). Once again, Oscar uses overconsumption as a remedy to his problems; unfortunately, the alcohol pushes him even father over the edge. He goes to the New Brunswick train station and attempts to commit suicide. Perhaps what is most interesting about Oscar’s failed suicide attempt is what he thinks right before jumping; he stood there “wishing he’d been born in a different body. Regretting all the books he would never write” (190). Oscar implicitly blames his body for his struggles in life, but the irony is that Oscar fails to realize how his own overconsumption has exacerbated his unhappiness with his body. Oscar seeks to alleviate the pain he associates with his body by causing his body the ultimate harm: suicide. Although Oscar’s suicide attempt is a failure—he does end up with two broken legs and a separated shoulder—his final attempt at love would end his life.

In what would become one of his last trips to the Dominican Republic, Oscar falls in love with a prostitute named Ybón. Ybón is described as a “golden mulata” with “snarled, apocalyptic hair [and] copper eyes” (279). Oscar falls for her almost
immediately, and Ybón reciprocates with an interest in Oscar. From the beginning, Oscar’s family admonishes him about how much time he spends with Ybón. Both his mother and grandmother tell Oscar that Ybón is a “puta [hooker]” and “she bought that house culeando [having sex]” (282). Ybón herself admits to having a boyfriend, known as “the capitán.” But much like Beli in her youth, Oscar ignores all warnings and continues to pursue Ybón until the fukú catches up with him. While taking Ybón home one night after a date, Oscar is stopped by the capitán and two of his goons. Although the capitán is not a member of the Trujillato, he certainly has continued that legacy of violence:

Was very busy under Demon Balaguer. Shooting at sindicatos [labor unions] from the backseat of cars. Burning down organizer’s homes. Smashing people’s faces with crowbars. . . . In 1974 he held an old woman’s head underwater till she died (she tried to organize some peasants for land rights in San Juan); in 1977 he played mazel-tov on a fifteen-year-old boy’s throat with the heels of his Florsheim (another Communist troublemaker . . .). (294-295)

Even with Trujillo dead, the legacy of dictatorship is very much alive in the Dominican Republic. In other words, as Mahler explains, “the names and details may have changed, but the story of tyranny and oppression remains the same” (128). Just as Trujillo was one manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, the capitán is another. And anyone is susceptible to the violence associated with that brand of hypermasculinity, even Dominicans who return from diaspora. Oscar constantly explains to the capitán that he did not do anything wrong and that he is an American citizen. But Oscar quickly finds out that his status as an American means nothing to the capitán. In a much larger context, his “Americaness” does not protect him from the violence of dictatorship because of America’s role in supporting dictatorships in the Dominican Republic and its willingness to turn a blind eye to the state sponsored violence that results.
In an ironic (and iconic) repetition of his mother’s experience, the capitán’s goons, who Oscar nicknames Grod and Grundy, take Oscar to the same cane fields where his mother was nearly beaten to death years earlier. The result is the same. The men struck him with the butt of a pistol, and even when Oscar was about to go unconscious, Grundy and Grod “kicked him in the nuts and perked him right up” (299). Just like his mother, Oscar is taken back to one of the sources of the fukú. The legacy of violence has come full circle as Oscar lays bloody in the cane field, the same place where Dominicans suffered great violence and injustice during slavery. Ironically, Oscar hoped that “some U.S. Marines would be out for a stroll” and could possibly save him. But all he sees is a lone, faceless man in a rocking chair—the same faceless man Beli saw when she was beaten—Trujillo. Once again, Oscar looks to America to lend some type of aid, but all he sees is Trujillo. His body is just as susceptible to pain and trauma in the Dominican Republic as it is in the United States, be it via dictatorial violence or self-inflicted overconsumption. Oscar clings to what little life he has left by listening to the Mongoose’s song until Clives, the family driver, rescues him, but the damage had already been done. Oscar sustained a “broken nose, shattered zygomatic arch, crushed seventh cranial nerve, three of his teeth snapped off at the gum, [and a] concussion” (301). Beli tries to bring Oscar back to the United States in hopes that that will protect him. But six weeks later, Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic to pursue a relationship with Ybón. In his final trip to the Dominican Republic, Grod and Grundy kidnap Oscar again, take him back to the cane field, and after Oscar’s last declaration of love for Ybón and promises of revenge on the “other side,” they murder him.
The Trujillo dictatorship killed Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, and Oscar’s father abandoned Oscar as an infant. Riofrio argues that within the context of diaspora, “fatherless boys go about crafting their masculine identities via their interaction with, and reaction against, all that is feminine” (29). Oscar is constantly looking for affirmation of his masculinity from his family, the women he pursues and the few friends he does have. When Oscar does not receive that affirmation, he punishes his body. As members of diaspora, both Oscar and Beli have internalized the legacies of violence associated with dictatorship and diaspora, been victims of it and re-enacted that violence against their own bodies.
CHAPTER 4
WRITING AS HEALING

Judith Herman posits that traumatic experiences "shatter the construction of self that is formed in relation to others" (51). Homi Bhabha comes to a similar conclusion in looking at trauma caused specifically by colonial and postcolonial conditions in his discussion of the “unhomely”. The “unhomely,” Bhabha asserts, is a moment of displacement where "the private and the public become part of each other" that results in "a vision that is divided as it is disorienting" (9). Experiences of the “unhomely” relate the "traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (11). Thus, the lives of Beli, Oscar and the dew breaker become more than a series of unfortunate events; instead, they serve as testaments to the violence that dictatorships are rooted in, yet attempt to conceal. Even in the midst of silence, whether imposed or voluntary, these characters' bodies refuse to be silent about what they have suffered. Their bodies are constantly remembering and retelling the initial traumas of dictatorship and new wounds produced by diaspora. With such an emphasis on the suffering, violence and pain, both novels beg the question where and how can victims of dictatorial violence and its legacy find healing?

Yunior reveals that there is one way to protect oneself from the fukú—the zafa, or counter spell. Yunior entertains the question of whether or not his own writing is a zafa of sorts. I would argue that both The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and The Dew Breaker—though the latter is not framed as such—are zafas to the curse of univocal historiographies of the Caribbean. The dictatorial historiography, Hanna explains, is "characterized by silences, denials and the violent repression of voices that might contradict the official narrative of heroic nationalism and the continuity of progress"
(504). That silencing manifested itself as literal writing through *continuismo*, which Russell H. Fitzgibbon described as “the practice of continuing the administration in power in a Latin American country by the process of a constitutional amendment or a provision in a new constitution…” (qtd. in Lopez-Calvo 19) and through metaphorically writing potential opponents out of history with torture and violence. Díaz suggests dictators all around the word “tend to recognize the power of word magicians, which is why they so thoroughly seek to control, negate and exterminate the narrative competition” (Danticat 6). In *The Dew Breaker*, the preacher is tortured in efforts to force him to stop writing sermons that encourage the Haitians to rebel against the dictatorship. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, is arrested, tortured and killed for writing a book that exposed the supernatural origin of Trujillo and his regime. These are stories that would traditionally be left out of dictatorial historiographies. But in recognizing and acknowledging the violence that Abelard and the preacher suffered, Díaz and Danticat's narratives are "way[s] to exorcise its [violence] detrimental power" (Hanna 503) over both the characters in the novels and the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Both novels speak to the power of scriptotherapy, which is the process of recovering from a traumatic experience through writing “(Henke xii). Suzette Henke explains why life-writing is an example of scriptotherapy and a valuable tool in dealing with trauma:

As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and interpret the intertextual codes inscribed on the personal consciousness by society and culture. Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world. (xvi).
In any other context, Beli’s, Abelard’s and the preacher’s stories would go untold. Oscar Cabral de Leon would never be the center of a story on the Dominican experience. He would be a marginal character, if he was included at all. Even Díaz admits that Oscar's "compassion, his outré interests, his dearth of traditional masculine markers—these were the things that . . . also guaranteed that no one would ever happily connect him to the nation he grew up out of. . . ." (Danticat 3). But in Yunior’s retelling, Oscar is representative of the Dominican Republic and a hero, willing and courageous enough to confront the legacy of dictatorship, even if the result is tragedy.

Oscar's transformation from a ghetto-nerd to a hero is strongly connected to his development as a writer. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz uses the metaphor of páginas en blancos [blank pages] to illustrate the exclusion of resistant figures. But writing on these blank pages, Mahler argues, is a “counter- gesture in which the placement of ink in the pages reveals that which the tyrannical power seeks to suppress” (131). Oscar begins to realize this during his time in the Dominican Republic. He writes to his sister that the new book he is writing, and plans to mail later, is “the cure to what ails us” (Díaz 333). Oscar, unlike his family, acknowledges the fukú’s power and realizes, much sooner than Yunior, “the only way out is in” (322). He must retrieve the family history that was ravaged and silenced by dictatorial violence. Only through speaking into that silence can Oscar potentially resist the persistence of similar power structures. I would argue that in giving a voice to his family’s past through his writing, Oscar attains the courage to speak courageously in the cane fields, and, what as Mahler describes, “write his judgment onto one of history’s blankest pages of impunity” (132). Unfortunately, Oscar’s book never arrives to the United States. But,
Yunior is capable of finishing what Oscar started by telling the "whole story." Yunior doesn’t simply tell the story of a ghetto nerd who is murdered; he highlights the political and cultural climate that allowed this to happen to Oscar and his family.

Similarly, Ka, the dew breaker’s daughter, implicitly "re-members" her parents by forcing them to confront their past in the novel. The dew breaker and his wife cannot simply concentrate on the present part of their lives in Brooklyn. To rectify the brokenness that trauma has caused them, the dew breaker and Anne must acknowledge their past in Haiti, no matter how painful. While there is no definitive narrator like Yunior throughout *The Dew Breaker*, telling the fictional story of a former *Tonton Macoute* is therapeutic for Danticat. She reveals that "I grew up under a dictatorship. Maybe that's a bigger scar than even I realized when I was a child or even now. . . . Maybe I was traumatized and that trauma is now surfacing in this way (Munro 85). Telling the dew breaker’s story allows Danticat a space to speak to and against the violence she witnessed firsthand, an opportunity she may not have had otherwise. Both Danticat and Díaz use fictional life-writing as what Henke calls a "protective space of iteration . . . to share an unutterable tale of pain and suffering, of transgression or victimization, in a discursive medium that can be addressed to everyone or no one. . . ." (xix). Thus, the validity of the texts becomes secondary, and the texts’ ability to resist traditional, hegemonic power structures and give a voice to those who were and continue to be oppressed is most important.

Danticat’s and Díaz’s use of non-linear, fragmented structures to tell these narratives has been characterized as a suggestion of "the disrupted memory of the traumatized individual . . . a deliberately disjointed juxtaposition of the traumatizing past
and the traumatized present” (Munro 91). However, I would argue that the disjointedness suggests a step toward healing. As Herman points out, “the goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism,” and as such, reconstructing the trauma story only makes it "more present and more real" (181). These authors are recounting a traumatic story, a history rather, that integrates the experiences of men and women, Haitians and Dominicans, victims and perpetrators. Díaz and Danticat "re-member" the fragments of an untold history to create a new "body" of history. Much like the necklace that Isis¹, Lola’s daughter, wears around her neck, made of three azabaches²—one for Lola, Oscar and Beli—and the sculpture that Ka³ makes of fragmented wood, these texts are monuments made of fragments that memorialize what Lucia Suarez calls the tears of Hispaniola—tears being symbolic of "depression, disillusion exasperation and powerlessness . . . [and] the sociocultural, political mechanisms that tear apart individual lives, families, communities, and nations” (7). As monuments, these texts acknowledge lives of people like Oscar, Abelard, Beli and the preacher who are silenced by the violence of dictatorship and diaspora. Furthermore as monuments, they restore power and control to survivors by making their sufferings

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¹ Interestingly, Isis is the Egyptian earth goddess and the goddess of magic. She is believed to have taught mankind medicine and is portrayed on coffins with long wings to protect the deceased. In the context of The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Isis could a source of healing for the Cabral de Leon family after a long stint of tragedy. Yunior believes that Isis will “take all [they] have done and all [they] have learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it” (299). Additionally, named after the protector of the deceased, Isis protects her dead uncle and mother from being forgotten and thus silenced forever by memorializing them by wearing their azabaches.

² Azabaches are black or red coral charms, usually in the shape of a fist, believed to protect the person wearing them from the "evil eye."

³ Ka is another element of Egyptian mythology. Similar to the soul, the Ka is “a double of the body…the body’s companion through life and after life” (Danticat 17). The Ka is also believed to be a person’s conscience. For the dew breaker, Ka is the “conscience” that forces the dew breaker to confess and confront the past he has tried so long to conceal.
visible and tangible to others and members of the upcoming generation like Ka and Isis. These untraditional monuments and "bodies" of history are fragmented, non-linear, and at times disjointed. But most importantly, they are resistant, resilient and refuse to be silenced. Danticat and Díaz memorialize traumatic bodies as markers of untold histories, and use those histories, or “zafas,” to speak powerfully into the silences that are dictatorship and diaspora.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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