The Role of Speaking in Edwidge Danticat's “The Dew Breaker:” Trauma, Healing, and Identity Reconstruction in a Postcolonial Framework

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Abstract. Unlike broader historical or biographical approaches, this method prioritizes the internal dynamics of the narrative, revealing how Danticat uses language to represent the unrepresentable—the psychic wounds of colonialism and dictatorship. As scholars like Silvia Martínez-Falquina have noted in their exploration of postcolonial trauma theory, such narratives resist simplistic healing arcs, instead emphasizing the ongoing negotiation between fragmentation and cohesion. The core argument posits that speaking in *The Dew Breaker* serves dual purposes: it exposes the challenges of articulation in a postcolonial context, where trauma often renders individuals mute, and it acts as a transformative force for personal and collective recovery. This duality is evident in the epigraph from the story "Night Talkers," where Claude reflects on his fortune in being able to verbalize his nightmares: "Claude was even luckier than he realized, for he was able to speak his nightmares to himself as well as to others". Here, Danticat employs irony and introspection to highlight speaking as a rare privilege amid widespread silence. Through detailed analysis, this paper will demonstrate how speaking facilitates healing by fostering empathy, reconstructs identity by reconnecting individuals to their cultural roots, and breaks isolation by challenging dictatorial narratives.

Keywords: The Dew Breaker, Trauma, Healing, Identity Reconstruction, Postcolonial Framework.

1. Introduction

To structure this inquiry, the paper begins with the challenges of speaking, analyzing barriers from both speaker and listener perspectives in stories like "The Book of the Dead" and "Water Child." For instance, the recurring motif of scars—physical and metaphorical—serves as a textual symbol of unspoken pain, as seen in the dew breaker's own facial scar, which he conceals under a mask of normalcy. This concealment mirrors the broader postcolonial condition, where colonized subjects internalize silence as a survival strategy, as theorized by Gayatri Spivak in her query, "Can the subaltern speak?" [1]. Danticat answers affirmatively, albeit tentatively, by showing how tentative articulations can forge paths to agency.

Furthermore, the paper considers the linguistic hybridity in the text, blending English with Creole elements, which underscores the immigrant's bifurcated identity. Phrases like "palannit" (night talker) not only add authenticity but also function as narrative devices to convey subconscious expressions of trauma. Through close reading, we see how Danticat's prose—sparse yet evocative—mimics the halting nature of traumatic recall, with short sentences and ellipses evoking unspoken gaps. This stylistic choice aligns with concept of trauma as a "belated" experience, where events are not fully known until articulate [2].

2. The Challenge of Speaking

The phrase "in a way" reveals Ka's tentative grasp on truth, a rhetorical device that highlights the provisional nature of postcolonial narration. Textually, the story's structure—beginning with the sculpture's disposal in a lake—symbolizes the submersion of false narratives, mirroring how trauma resists easy articulation. Ka's inauthenticity stems from her detachment from Haiti's history, rendering her speech "futile" [3]. Extending this, a close reading of the dialogue between Ka and her parents

shows fragmented sentences and evasions, such as her mother's "I have to tell you something", which trails off, embodying the blockage of speech.

Anne, Ka's mother, faces a more profound impasse due to her ambiguous identity as the wife of a perpetrator who killed her brother. Danticat describes her as "nurturing a great pain that she could never speak about", using the metaphor of nurturing to suggest pain as a living entity that demands but defies expression. This textual choice aligns with Fanon's analysis of colonial alienation, where the colonized internalize contradictions that mute self-expression [4]. In analyzing the footnote defining "dew breaker" as "a person with free reign... acting as judge, jury and executioner" [4], we see how Danticat incorporates meta-narrative elements to educate readers, contrasting with characters' voicelessness. This paratextual intervention highlights the challenge: while the author speaks, her characters struggle, emphasizing the postcolonial gap between representation and reality.

Shifting to the listener's role, "Water Child" portrays Nadine's isolation amid unresponsive audiences. As a nurse in Brooklyn, Nadine grapples with the aftermath of an abortion, her silence compounded by distant relationships. Her boyfriend ignores calls, her parents impose expectations, and colleagues like Josette lack shared cultural depth. Danticat's narrative voice notes Josette as "one of the younger Haitian RNs... who had come to Brooklyn in early childhood and spoke English with no accent at all" using accent as a symbol of assimilation that widens the rift. Text analysis reveals how dialogue in this story is minimal and stilted, with Nadine's interactions reduced to internal thoughts: "She didn't want to explain". This introspection underscores view of trauma as collective yet isolating, where listeners fail due to physical and emotional distance [5].

Nadine's empathy with the voiceless patient Ms. Hinds further illustrates limited connection. Despite resonance—"they are both isolated" (as per original analysis)—Danticat limits their interaction to gestures, not words, symbolizing the boundaries of empathy. A close reading of the water child earring Nadine wears reveals it as a talisman of unspoken grief, its "tiny glass beads" evoking fragile, unspoken memories. This object motif recurs across stories, linking personal artifacts to broader trauma narratives.

Expanding to other tales, "Seven" depicts the couple's seven-year separation, where speaking via letters sustains but distorts connection. The husband's arrival in New York leads to awkward dialogues, with phrases like "We have to talk" highlighting the effort required. Danticat's use of repetition—"seven years, seven days"—mimics ritualistic speech, a textual strategy to cope with absence. In "Monkey Tails," Michel's childhood memories of violence are narrated retrospectively, with speaking delayed until adulthood, reflecting Caruth's "latency" of trauma [6]. The story's frame narrative, addressing an unborn child, transforms private silence into future-oriented speech, suggesting potential transcendence.

These challenges are not insurmountable; Danticat subtly foreshadows healing through moments of breakthrough. For instance, in "The Book of Miracles," Beatrice's cryptic warnings about dew breakers hint at suppressed knowledge seeking outlet. Textually, her "whispered" revelations contrast with earlier silences, indicating speaking's emergent power.

In sum, through meticulous text analysis—examining dialogue sparsity, symbolic objects, and narrative fragmentation—Danticat portrays speaking as a contested terrain in postcolonial trauma. This sets the stage for exploring its therapeutic potential.

3. Speaking to Others: A Method of Healing

While trauma isolates, speaking to others in *The Dew Breaker* fosters healing by creating shared spaces of understanding. Text analysis of "Night Talkers" and related stories reveals how dialogic exchanges encode pain, build empathy, and integrate individual suffering into collective memory, drawing on postcolonial theories of witnessing.

In "Night Talkers," Dany and his aunt Estina's nocturnal habits symbolize subconscious articulation. Danticat's descriptive passage—"They were both palannits, night talkers, people who wet their beds, not with urine but with words"—employs metaphor to equate speech with involuntary

release, a textual device that humanizes trauma's overflow. The alliteration in "wet... words" evokes fluidity, contrasting the rigidity of waking silence. As Dany listens, he realizes their shared "nocturnal habits", a phrase that links personal quirks to cultural patterns, aligning with Ifowodo's idea of narratives as testimonies [7].

Claude's confession amplifies this healing. As a deportee who killed his father, Claude's story evokes Dany's loss: "Perhaps Claude too had never learned how to grieve... Maybe the death of a parent early in life... eliminated that instinct". Danticat's conditional "perhaps" and "maybe" reflect speculative empathy, a narrative technique that invites readers to fill gaps. This exchange validates both men's pain, with Claude becoming "a member of their tribe", using tribal metaphor to signify communal inclusion. Textually, the story's rural Haitian setting contrasts urban isolation in other tales, suggesting cultural roots facilitate speaking.

Extending to "The Bridal Seamstress," Beatrice's interview with Aline reveals suppressed trauma. Beatrice's halting narrative—"They came for me... in the middle of the night"—builds tension through ellipsis, mimicking traumatic recall. Aline's listening role transforms her from outsider to witness, as Danticat notes her "taking notes", symbolizing documentation as healing. This aligns with Bellamy's discussion of speech dislocating silence [8].

In "Monkey Tails," Michel's recounting to his son bridges generations: "I'm telling you this because... you might need to know". The direct address shifts from monologue to dialogue, fostering intergenerational healing. Danticat's use of sensory details—"the smell of burning tires"—grounds abstract trauma in concrete language, aiding comprehension.

Theoretical integration: Caruth's "witnessing" posits that sharing trauma integrates it [9]. Danticat enacts this through polyphonic narratives, where voices overlap, as in the cycle's structure linking stories via recurring motifs like prisons. Challenges persist; not all speaking heals. In "Water Child," Nadine's unanswered letters highlight failed communication. Yet, her gift to parents—a TV—symbolizes indirect expression, suggesting alternative modes. Overall, text analysis shows speaking as a dialogic balm, weaving individual threads into communal fabric.

4. Speaking to Oneself: Reconstructing Identity

In Edwidge Danticat's The Dew Breaker, the act of speaking to oneself emerges as a profound mechanism for reconstructing identity, particularly in the wake of postcolonial trauma. For instance, the recurring use of free indirect discourse allows readers to access characters' unvoiced thoughts, revealing how self-talk bridges the gap between fragmented memories and a reconstituted sense of self.

A prime exemplar of this process is found in "The Funeral Singer," where Freda, one of three Haitian women attending English classes in New York, gradually reconstructs her identity through layered self-narration. Freda's revelations unfold progressively, beginning with a tentative disclosure during a class sharing session: "I was asked to sing at the national palace..." [10]. This initial statement serves as an entry point into her past, but it is superficial, masking the deeper traumas beneath. As the story progresses, Freda delves further inward, recalling: "The first time I ever sang in public was at my father’s memorial Mass. I sang 'Brother Timonie,' a song whose cadence rises and falls, like the waves of the ocean". Here, Danticat's textual choices—such as the rhythmic description of the song's "cadence" evoking oceanic "waves"—symbolize the fluid, cyclical nature of memory in Haitian culture, where oral traditions and folklore often draw on natural metaphors to convey resilience amid upheaval. The wave imagery not only reflects the ebb and flow of grief but also alludes to the transatlantic migrations forced by colonialism, positioning Freda's identity within a larger diasporic narrative.

Freda's introspection deepens in her final recollection: "I was asked to leave the country by my mother because I wouldn’t accept an invitation to sing at the national palace. But I also left because long ago my father had disappeared. He’d had a fish stall at the market. One day, one macoute came to take it over and another one took my father away. When my father returned, he didn’t have a tooth

left in his mouth". Analyzed textually, this passage demonstrates chronological layering, with each iteration building upon the last to solidify Freda's self-understanding. The repetition of "I was asked" acts as a refrain, a narrative device that mirrors the ritualistic quality of funeral singing, reinforcing memory through iteration. Initially, her identity as a funeral singer appears as a mere "few details of [her] life", a fragmented anecdote. However, through self-narration, it evolves into a multifaceted symbol of resistance and witness-bearing. By refusing the palace invitation—a direct challenge to the Duvalier regime's co-optation of artists—Freda reconstructs herself not as a victim but as an exile-heroine, her voice a testament to familial and national oppression.

This reconstruction aligns closely with Linda Martín Alcoff's conceptualization of identities as "positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives" [10]. Danticat's first-person shifts in Freda's monologues emphasize this positioning, allowing her to situate her personal loss—her father's torture and disappearance—within the collective trauma of Haitian society under dictatorship. The sensory details, such as the father's toothless return, ground abstract oppression in visceral reality, making self-speaking a corporeal act of reclamation. Furthermore, the song "Brother Timonie" itself, with its tidal rhythm, symbolizes the fluidity of Haitian identity, which blends African, indigenous, and colonial influences. In this way, Freda's internal narrative reaffirms her cultural roots, using language as a vessel for heritage, as argued by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who asserts that "language carries culture" and, through narration, conveys values that help individuals comprehend their place in the world [9].

Expanding beyond "The Funeral Singer," Danticat extends this theme in "Seven," where the unnamed wife's internal reflections highlight identity reconstruction amid the dislocations of immigration and separation. After seven years apart from her husband due to visa issues, she confronts her transformed self upon his arrival in New York. Her introspective thought—"I am not the woman he married" [8]—captures the essence of this shift, a declarative statement that marks a moment of self-recognition. Textually, Danticat employs a mirror motif throughout the story, symbolizing self-confrontation: the wife gazes at her reflection, noting changes in her body and demeanor shaped by American life. This visual symbolism complements her internal monologue, where she rehearses conversations and anticipates reunions, using hypothetical dialogues to negotiate her new identity as an independent woman in a foreign land.

The narrative structure of "Seven" reinforces this process, with its repetitive emphasis on the number seven—seven years of separation, seven days of waiting—creating a ritualistic framework akin to incantation. This repetition in the text mirrors the wife's mental rehearsals, allowing her to speak to herself as a means of adaptation. For example, she imagines explaining her routines: "I have my own room now... I pay the rent myself", phrases that assert autonomy while grappling with the guilt of change. In a postcolonial context, this self-talk addresses the hybridity of immigrant identity, where the wife must reconcile her Haitian origins with American assimilation. Danticat's sparse prose, with short, declarative sentences, evokes the halting nature of internal speech, underscoring the effort required to reconstruct a coherent self amid cultural fragmentation.

Similar dynamics appear in "Water Child," where Nadine's internal narratives reveal a quieter, more isolated form of self-speaking. Struggling with the aftermath of an abortion and the emotional distance from her family, Nadine engages in private rituals that function as unspoken monologues. She crafts a "water child" shrine in her apartment, whispering to it as if addressing her lost child: "She spoke to it in a low, soothing voice, the way she imagined mothers spoke to newborns" [7]. This imagined dialogue, analyzed through the lens of text analysis, transforms object into interlocutor, with the earring's "tiny glass beads" symbolizing fragile, unspoken bonds. Nadine's self-talk—often manifested in her avoidance of external communication—allows her to reconstruct her identity as a grieving mother within the confines of her solitude. However, Danticat complicates this by showing its limitations; Nadine's internal world isolates her further, as seen in her reluctance to share with colleagues or parents. Yet, this very introspection enables a tentative reclamation, aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on narrative as a pathway to integration [5].

Across the story cycle, this theme culminates in the dew breaker's own unspoken remorse in the titular story. The former torturer, now a barber in Brooklyn, engages in profound internal reckoning, his silences punctuated by fleeting reflections on his past atrocities. Danticat describes his scar as a "mask", a metaphor that extends to his self-identity, which he reconstructs through private atonement. In moments of solitude, he "speaks" to his victims in his mind, imagining confessions that never materialize aloud: "He wanted to tell her everything". This internal dialogue, rendered through fragmented flashbacks, pieces together his fractured self, transforming him from perpetrator to penitent. Textually, the non-linear structure—jumping between past and present—mirrors the associative leaps of self-talk, emphasizing how such narration rebuilds identity by confronting ethical ambiguities.

5. Breaking the Isolation

Set in a rural Haitian church during the height of the Duvalier regime, the preacher boldly recounts the poisoning of his wife by government supporters, directly confronting the dictatorship's narrative of invincibility. Danticat's narrative captures the ripple effect of this act through the emotional response of Léon, the shoeshine man, a listener in the congregation: "Léon, the shoeshine man, wiped a tear from his eye, remembering his own son who was one of those men who roamed the night in denim uniforms and carried people away to their deaths. His son might have been one of those he'd emptied the slop jars on and who had shot in his direction in return, for a good Volunteer, it was said, should be able to kill his mother and father for the regime" [5]. This passage, analyzed textually, employs irony to underscore shared victimhood across seemingly oppositional lines. The preacher, a vocal dissident, and Léon, the father of a Tonton Macoute (a "Volunteer" enforcer), appear divided by allegiance—yet Danticat's phrasing reveals their common alienation. The conditional "might have been" introduces speculative empathy, inviting readers to contemplate the absurdity of familial rupture under tyranny, while the proverbial dictum about killing one's parents amplifies the regime's grotesque inversion of kinship bonds.

From a text analysis perspective, the sermon's rhythmic prose mimics Haitian oral traditions, such as Vodou chants or folktales, which historically served as subversive forms of resistance against colonial silencing. Danticat structures the preacher's speech with repetitive cadences and biblical allusions, evoking a call-and-response dynamic even in narrative form: "He spoke of his wife's death... as if it were a parable". This stylistic choice—short, emphatic sentences interspersed with sensory details like "the smell of incense"—creates a communal atmosphere, drawing listeners into a shared auditory space. The irony deepens when considering Léon's tearful reaction; despite his son's complicity, the sermon evokes resonance because both men are victims of the same systemic alienation. Danticat selects this poignant father-son example to illustrate dictatorship's divide-and-conquer strategy, where blood ties are weaponized, yet speaking exposes the underlying unity of suffering. As Maria Rice Bellamy notes, such scenes demonstrate how speech acts as a "figure of dislocation and acculturation," breaking silence to realign individuals within a community of survivors [7]. In this way, the preacher's public narration not only challenges the government's narrative but also forges unexpected alliances, reclaiming power from oppressive isolation.

This theme of communal unification through speech extends to "The Book of the Dead," where family revelations shatter personal and intergenerational isolation. Ka, the sculptor daughter, discovers her father's past as a dew breaker, a truth long concealed by her parents' silence. The story's climax unfolds in a hotel room confrontation, where the father's confession—"I am not a prisoner... I was the hunter" [8]—pierces the veil of secrecy. Textually, Danticat builds tension through delayed revelations and fragmented dialogues, mirroring the isolating effects of unspoken trauma. Prior to this, the family's interactions are marked by ellipses and evasions, such as Anne's hesitant "I have to tell you something", which symbolizes the barriers erected by guilt and fear. Once spoken, however, the truth catalyzes a reconfiguration of relationships: Ka reflects, "My father, who never spoke... was

now telling me everything". This shift from silence to torrent underscores speaking's role in bridging divides, as the family confronts their shared history of violence and exile.

Analyzing the narrative structure, Danticat interweaves flashbacks with present-tense dialogues, creating a textual mosaic that reflects the breaking of isolation. The sculpture itself—a wooden figure discarded in a lake—serves as a symbol of submerged truths surfacing through speech. Ka's initial attempt to "speak" for her father via art fails due to inauthenticity, but verbal disclosure allows for authentic reconnection. This aligns with postcolonial trauma theory, where, as Janette Collins argues, representing trauma ethically requires acknowledging the perpetrator-victim continuum, fostering communal understanding rather than division [9]. In the story's resolution, the family's drive home becomes a space of tentative dialogue, suggesting that speaking initiates the dissolution of isolation, even if healing remains incomplete.

Further illustrating this dynamic is "The Bridal Seamstress," where Beatrice's interview with journalist Aline transforms private isolation into shared testimony. Beatrice, a retired seamstress haunted by her torturer's phantom pursuit, initially embodies solitude: "I live alone now... no one comes" [10]. Her narrative unfolds haltingly, recounting her abduction and torture: "They came for me in the middle of the night... pulled me out of bed". Danticat's use of short, clipped sentences evokes the stutter of recalled trauma, while the interview format—question-and-answer—mimics a therapeutic exchange that draws Beatrice out of seclusion. As Aline listens, Beatrice's speech gains momentum, revealing how the dew breaker "marked" her with a scar, a motif recurring across the cycle to symbolize enduring isolation.

Text analysis reveals how this act of speaking unites disparate lives: Aline, initially detached, becomes implicated as a witness, her note-taking symbolizing the documentation of hidden histories. The story's irony lies in Beatrice's belief that her torturer follows her to New York, a delusion that underscores paranoia-induced isolation—yet sharing it with Aline dispels some of its power. This resonates with Lambek and Antze's framework, where tense pasts are negotiated through narrative, allowing individuals to "unite those who have suffered" by externalizing internal divisions [5]. Danticat extends this to the diasporic context, where immigrants like Beatrice are isolated by geography and memory; speaking bridges these gaps, integrating personal stories into a broader Haitian-American tapestry.

In "Monkey Tails," Michel's retrospective narration to his unborn son further demonstrates speaking's anti-isolationist power during moments of political upheaval. Set during the 1986 fall of Baby Doc Duvalier, the story captures communal jubilation amid chaos: "People were dancing in the streets... shouting 'Liberté!'" [6]. Michel, a young boy, recounts his friendship with Romain and their acts of defiance, using direct address—"I'm telling you this because someday you might need to know"—to break temporal isolation, connecting past events to future generations. Textually, Danticat employs vivid sensory language—"the crackle of gunfire," "the scent of burning tires"—to immerse readers in the collective experience, contrasting individual fears with communal solidarity.

The story's frame narrative, a monologue to an absent listener, transforms solitude into dialogue, emphasizing how speaking preserves cultural memory against erasure. Romain's revelation about his imprisoned father adds layers of irony, as personal secrets surface amid public revolt, uniting the boys in shared vulnerability.

6. Conclusion

Textually, the sparse prose and elliptical structures mirror the halting nature of traumatic recall, aligning with Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as a "belated" event that defies immediate articulation [7]. These obstacles set the stage for speaking's redemptive potential, demonstrating how postcolonial subjects must navigate internalized silences imposed by colonial and dictatorial histories.

Building on this foundation, the analysis of speaking to others as a method of healing, particularly in "Night Talkers," revealed how shared narratives encode pain and cultivate empathy. Dany and Claude's nocturnal confessions, rendered through metaphorical language like "palannits" (night

talkers who "wet their beds... with words" [8], symbolize the subconscious overflow of trauma into communal spaces. Danticat's use of conditional phrasing and tribal metaphors fosters a sense of resonance, transforming individual grief into collective witnessing. This process, as Ifowodo argues, allows survivors to bear testimony through literary narratives, integrating personal perspectives into broader historical tragedies [9]. Extending this to other tales, such as the tentative dialogues in "Seven" and the testimonial exchanges in "The Bridal Seamstress," underscores speaking's therapeutic role in bridging emotional divides, countering the isolation that trauma engenders. The theme of speaking to oneself for identity reconstruction, exemplified in "The Funeral Singer," further enriches this framework.

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