An Immigrant Artist at Work: A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat

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Edwidge Danticat and I met in Miami on 8 September 2009. I had arranged the interview as part of my three-day trip to Miami, during which I also visited the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC), the nonprofit legal services organization representing countless immigrants and asylum seekers and promoting basic human rights for all immigrants.[1] The day before I met Danticat, I interviewed Cheryl Little, FIAC executive director and, as the following conversation is going to reveal, an important figure for the Danticat family during their period of tribulation with the Department of Homeland Security. Danticat's beautifully written memoir *Brother, I'm Dying* was published in 2007.[2] Since first reading it, I had been haunted by the story of her eighty-one-year-old uncle mandatorily detained in a Miami processing center after requesting political asylum in the United States. Reverend Joseph Dantica would die in detention a few days after his arrival in Miami, without his family members, being allowed to see him. Suddenly Danticat and her family joined the ranks of a most vulnerable category of individuals, individuals that since 9/11, Danticat writes, "live with the double threat of being possible victims and suspects" by simply being immigrants.[3]

1 Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, "Mission and History," http://www.fiacfla.org/ (accessed 12 June 2011).
2 Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying* (New York: Knopf, 2007).
3 Edwidge Danticat, foreword to Tram Nguyen, ed., *We Are All Suspects Now: Untold Stories from Immigrant Communities after 9/11* (Boston: Beacon, 2005), xi.

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As an immigrant with a deep interest in literature and immigration matters, I found fascinating the way in which Danticat's moving account of her personal loss merged the private and the public, suddenly fueling a heated debate on immigration, asylum, and US responses to contemporary migration. I began to teach Danticat's book in my course Critical Race Theory, which investigates the intersections of race, power, and the law in the United States. Crucial among critical race theory practitioners is the role of stories as powerful instruments in bringing about a better understanding of race and race relations. According to Richard Delgado, one of the leading figures of the critical race theory movement, "Stories, parables, chronicles, and narratives are powerful means for destroying mindset—the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings against a background of which legal and political discourse takes place."[4] When these same stories are told by members of minority groups, the so-called outgroups, they acquire an even more compelling force. Such stories not only correct misperceptions while challenging hegemonic discourse but also empower the tellers by bringing cohesiveness and strength to entire communities. In some cases, stories can save lives, too.

Since the publication of *Krik? Krak!*, her first collection of short stories, Edwidge Danticat has been telling and retelling stories in the Haitian tradition of the storyteller's calling out "Krik?," followed by a well-disposed audience's gathering around and answering "Krak!"[5] Along with material from Haitian folk wisdom, Danticat's stories vividly portray the tortured history of her native country, the horror of living under a dictatorial regime, the insurmountable obstacles faced by generations of Haitian women caught in a system of violence often directed at their own bodies, and, more important, perhaps, the resilience of life in the face of such devastation and despair. Elsewhere I have written that Danticat's narratives are "monuments to life, resistance, and survival," transnational sites of memory in which Haitians at home and in the dyaspora can remain hopeful for a country that, despite its desperate social situation and the extremely negative media representation, continues to produce a rich and creative culture.[6] Discussing the challenge she has embraced, Danticat states, "I look to the past—to Haiti—hoping that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with—the ones that have passed on—will choose to tell their story through my voice. For those of us who have a voice must speak to the present and the past."[7]

Home, belonging, migration, and exile are recurrent themes in Danticat's work. Her story is a familiar tale in our age of global migrations: born in Port-au-Prince in 1969, Danticat was raised by her reverend uncle, Joseph Dantica, and his wife after her parents had migrated to the United States in search of a better future than the one offered by the dictatorial regime of

4 Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," in Adriene Katherine Wing and Jean Stefancic, eds., *The Law Unbound: A Richard Delgado Reader* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007), 3.

5 Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* (New York: Soho, 1995).

6 Elvira Pulitano, "Landscape, Memory, and Survival in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat," *Anthurium* 6, no. 2 (2008): para. 26, http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_6/issue_2/pulitano-landscapememory.html.

7 Edwidge Danticat, quoted in Ethan Casey, "Remembering Haiti," review of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, by Edwidge Danticat, *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995): 525–26.

François Duvalier back in Haiti. At the age of twelve, Danticat moved to New York to join her parents. Life as an immigrant teenager at a time when images of Haitian "boat peoples" were in the news almost daily was not easy. Her only solace to the difficulties of straddling the cultural divide between Haiti and her new American home was offered by reading and writing. After obtaining a BA in French Literature, Danticat entered the MFA program at Brown University and graduated with a thesis that would later become her first and much acclaimed novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.[8] This book, along with her short story collection *Krik? Krak!*, which was a National Book Award finalist, would launch her literary career. "A great literary artist and also a grand cultural critic" are the words used by Cornel West to describe Danticat after her latest literary endeavor, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*.[9] Combining memoir and essay, the book, whose title was partly inspired by an Albert Camus lecture, explores the themes of art and exile and the responsibility of the immigrant artist to bear witness when her country of origin is living tragic times. The recipient of a 2009 MacArthur Fellowship, Danticat, in the words of the foundation program's selecting committee, is a novelist "chronicling the power of human resistance and endurance through moving and insightful depictions of the Haitian immigrant experience."[10]

We met in my hotel, in Miami Beach, on a hot, humid late afternoon in September. Earlier that day, adjacent to the hotel lobby I had spotted a quiet corner, which looked like a small, private library. We sat there and began our conversation. She was exactly as I had seen her on the various dust jackets of her many books I had been reading (and teaching) over the years. But she was more than that. Her warm spirit and incredibly friendly character put me immediately at ease and calmed down my reader-related anxieties. As we started talking it felt as though we had known each other for a long time. Her voice struck me as serene and reassuring while at the same time transmitting a force that must come from the determination to dare, from the passion to write when nothing else seems possible.

In *Create Dangerously* Danticat wonders about the existence of an immigrant reader:

> I too sometimes wonder if in the intimate, both solitary and solidary, union between writers and readers a border can really exist. Is there a border between Antigone's desire to bury her brother and the Haitian mother of 1964 who desperately wants to take her dead son's body out of the street to give him a proper burial, knowing that if she does this she too may die?[11]

What mysterious force drove a group of Haitian young men and women to read and stage Albert Camus's *Caligula* underground as a rebellious response to a dictatorial regime or, as

8 Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho, 1994).
9 Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), back cover.
10 MacArthur Fellows Program, "Meet the 2009 Fellows," http://www.macfound.org/site/c.lkLXJ8MQKrH/b.5410503/k.11CB/Meet_the_2009_Fellows.htm (accessed 26 September 2010).
11 Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 16. Danticat refers to the execution of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, two members of the group Jeune Haïti, who in 1964 engaged in a guerrilla war hoping to bring down the Duvalier dictatorship. Numa and Drouin were captured by the Duvalier army and were publicly executed in Port-au-Prince on 12 November 1964 (1–5).

Danticat says, as "disobedience to a directive"? And is it this border that makes writers such as Camus or Sophocles ultimately Haitians?

> There are many possible interpretations of what it means to create dangerously, and Albert Camus, like the poet Osip Mandelstam, suggests that it is creating as a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive.[12]

Is this border that makes my own story as an immigrant to the United States incredibly similar—despite the different cultural and historical conditions of my upbringing—to the stories I read in Danticat's fiction and nonfiction? "How does [a] reader find the courage to take this bite, to open that book?" Danticat asks, suggesting that "the writer's courage in having stepped forward" might be the reason for the reader's eagerness to read. "Create dangerously for people who read dangerously," she says.[13] But I would also suggest that for many of us who are "out-of-country and even out-of-language," to borrow Salman Rushdie's fitting description of the immigrant experience, reading the stories written by people who in their dangerous undertakings have gone as far as risking their lives to speak truth to power, becomes a way to recognize our own stories, no matter the distance in time, no matter the distance that an ocean or a continent might create.[14]

Throughout the interview, Danticat and I discuss at length the passionate response that her novel *The Farming of Bones* produced on both sides of the Haitian-Dominican border.[15] "The Dominican people became so sensitive about their portrayal. . . . And the Haitians, who wanted me to be much more brutal in my depictions," Danticat explains. But isn't this precisely the primary role of literature? we both ask. To provoke debate, to shake readers' consciousness, to incite action? I have struggled with these questions many times recently upon reflecting on narratives from "home." As I am writing this introduction, a young writer in my native Italy is living under state protection, his life threatened for having written a book in which he exposes the global ramifications of his hometown's organized crime in the South of Italy. "The only weapon that until now hadn't been used against the camorra has worked . . . Literature," writes Roberto Saviano, author of *Gomorrah*.[16] "Literature and power, writing that becomes dangerous only thanks to the existence of the most dangerous entity: the reader," Saviano writes in *La bellezza e l'inferno* (*The Beauty and the Hell*), echoing Danticat.[17]

12 Ibid., 11.
13 Ibid., 10.
14 Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 12.
15 Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Soho, 1998).
16 Roberto Saviano, *Gomorrah: A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples's Organized Crime System*, trans. Virginia Jewiss (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), back cover (ellipsis in original). *Camorra* is the name of the Neapolitan crime organization usually considered the counterpart of the Sicilian Mafia. A film based on the novel was a finalist at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival.
17 Roberto Saviano, *La bellezza e l'inferno* (Milano: Mondadori, 2009), 191 (translation mine). Interestingly enough, the title of this book was inspired by Camus's *The Rebel*.

As I read *Brother, I'm Dying* I can't but think of the endless numbers of refugees currently risking their lives in the desperate attempt to make it to the Mediterranean shores, to open that golden door that in most cases is being slammed in their faces. The European dream of these African and Middle Eastern immigrants ends along the shores of a small Mediterranean island following European governments' policies of push-back, in blatant violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.[18] In reading Danticat's stories, I recognize my own story at the same time as I recognize many other stories told by immigrant writers from the Caribbean. These are the same writers who, in one way or another, have also been speaking to Danticat's experience as an immigrant artist in the United States: Michelle Cliff, Julia Alvarez, Junot Diaz, Jamaica Kincaid, and Staceyann Chin, among others. Danticat, along with her friend Dany Laferrière and numerous other Haitian-born writers and artists are part of the dyaspora that she, borrowing the words of Haiti's most famous journalist, Jean Dominique, describes as "people with their feet planted in both worlds," which is the condition of most migrant writers today.[19] As I listen to Danticat's generous answers to my often long-winded questions, I realize that the formal interview becomes more and more a conversation between two immigrants often asking the unbearable question, "Will I ever truly belong?"[20]

Elvira Pulitano: With *Brother, I'm Dying* you wrote a powerful memoir in which the personal and the political continuously intersect. Even though all your fiction is undoubtedly political, what struck me in this case is how you politicized a deeply dramatic personal event such as the death of your uncle, how you made public such an intimately private tragedy. Did the attention that the book received, beyond strictly literary circles, surprise you?

Edwidge Danticat: Yes, it did surprise me that the book got so much attention beyond literary circles. When I began writing *Brother, I'm Dying*, I thought I was going to write it for therapeutic reasons. When people would ask me what I was working on, I would tell them I was working on a really small book about something rather personal. Even though my uncle's story had been in the news and many other people had gone through a similar situation, at first I was writing this book for myself, like a personal keepsake to remember my uncle and my father, who died within months of each other. I could tell early on, however, in the prepublication phase, that there was going to be wider interest in the book, a kind of news element to it. A couple of things contributed to the nonliterary attention the book received. We were living during a period when the people who were in charge of immigration policy felt so empowered by things like the Patriot Act to do anything they wished to immigrants—legal or otherwise—because they were supposedly protecting the country, so I think the subject of immigration-detainee mistreatment had become to some extent familiar even to people who were not involved in

18 The island of Lampedusa, situated 127 miles from Sicily and 70 miles from Tunisia, has made international news as a strategic transit point for illegal immigration to Europe.
19 Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 51.
20 Ibid., 18.

immigration matters. That's why there was a news element to it. At that time in Miami, where I live, people were being picked up on the street and off public transportation buses. There were raids in the middle of the night and so forth. There was a kind of persecution of immigrants after September 11, 2001, that was very intense.

EP: I have taught *Brother, I'm Dying* in a course called Critical Race Theory, a course that explores the relationship between race, power, and the law in the United States. One of the most interesting challenges that critical race theorists pose to the legal system is the use of a narrative form (legal storytelling) as a way to resist the idea that laws are or can be written from a neutral perspective. The idea of stories as empowering narratives is also used by human rights organizations such as the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center [FIAC] and Human Rights First [HRF], as you well know. Could you talk more about your interaction with FIAC and the connection between literature and human rights activism?

ED: I have visited a law school class at Florida International University, where they use *Krik? Krak!* as a course text. They are teaching the lawyers narrative, storytelling, as a way to make their cases. In this particular class, a lot of these students are going to be immigration lawyers who will deal with asylum seekers. So the idea of being able to inhabit a story and then retelling it to a judge, especially an immigration judge, is quite crucial to their success. But my relationship with FIAC goes way, way back. When I left graduate school in the early 1990s, I went to work for the filmmaker Jonathan Demme, and Jonathan was part of a group called Artists for Democracy in Haiti. Jonathan would recruit Hollywood stars like Susan Sarandon and others to do just that, do the storytelling for Haitian refugees and asylum seekers on the news and other venues. There was a woman, for example, named Yolande Jean, who was an HIV-positive Haitian woman in detention at the US military base at Guantánamo—as Haitians were held in Guantánamo then—and she had written a letter saying goodbye to her children because she was sure that she would die in detention and would never see them again. Susan Sarandon read this letter at different demonstrations in New York City, and her reading the letter started a big media campaign that probably saved Yolande Jean's life. That's how Yolande Jean got out of Guantánamo Bay.

FIAC was also working to help a young man named Ronald Aristide who was in detention in Miami**,** so Artists for Democracy in Haiti had a campaign around this teenager who was incarcerated just because he was seeking asylum in the United States. I was working for Jonathan at the time and that's how I met Cheryl Little of FIAC. Over the years, I remained in touch with her even after I stopped working with Artists for Democracy in Haiti. When I moved to Miami, I started doing things with FIAC. I spoke at their annual dinner and I narrated some of their videos. And then all of a sudden I found myself to be one of their clients. That was quite extraordinary; to have been involved in this issue all this time and to find myself a victim of it. It shows how common it is, how often these kinds of things happen. Actually the weekend my uncle was put in detention, I tried to reach Cheryl Little at home. She was one

of the first people I tried to reach. In the documents that my uncle was given by the immigration people at the airport, there is actually a FIAC letter in it. FIAC is one of the organizations that offer free legal representation to detained asylum seekers and others. One of a few that receive calls from people in detention and work pro bono. There is a whole predatory system of lawyers who try to rip off people who are in detention. They have people in there, I guess, who are scouts, who work inside, and who tell people to tell their loved ones to give them five thousand dollars and they will be out by Tuesday. There is a whole predatory system around immigration law that's based on all these lies and deceptions. And so, back to my uncle's story, we got a wonderful, smart, and nonpredatory lawyer from a firm run by another friend of mine, who went in and tried to help my uncle, but once my uncle died in the custody of US immigration officials, it was actually Cheryl Little who said, "Let's pursue this further. Let's get the documents." Getting the documents out of both a practical and emotional need to know what happened. But there were a lot of people, a lot of organizations, a lot of lawyers who said to us, "It's over. You can't pursue this any further," because they were really looking at money. It is not like you can make any money, so why pursue this if there is no money at the other end of it? And Cheryl was like, "We'll sue to at least find out what happened." FIAC does this extraordinary amount of work with this small staff of lawyers. And they do much better than a lot of private lawyers.

EP: Well, you can tell that it takes a lot of determination to do what they do, but also passion, and the latter can be contagious. Are you still working with FIAC?

ED: Yes, Cheryl and I every once in a while meet and have lunch and try to figure out what we can do together. The tricky thing now is that things with immigration are changing a lot more slowly than we thought. It's hard when your guy, when the president you support is now in the White House and you feel like things are not moving along as quickly as you had hoped.

EP: Do you see the Obama administration moving in a sort of different direction when it comes to immigration? I'm not suggesting, of course, that President Obama is going to magically overhaul our broken immigration system (although he has called repeatedly for comprehensive immigration reform), but can you sense that things are going to take a different turn from now on?

ED: I hope so. Aside from the FIAC cases, there is a landmark case in California that I have been following for years and wrote about for the *Nation* magazine.[21] It's the case of a woman named Rody Alvarado, a Guatemalan woman who fled to the United States because of domestic violence. She has been seeking asylum since Janet Reno was attorney general, and, every time, her case gets sent back to the Board of Immigration Appeals, because the

21 Edwidge Danticat, "A Crime to Dream," *Nation*, 2 May 2005, http://cgrs.uchastings.edu/documents/media/nation_4–05.pdf.

way this case is decided will determine whether this country grants gender-based asylum. But how did we get to Rody? [*laughs*]

EP: Because I asked you if you see the Obama administration moving to hopefully a new direction.

ED: Oh yes. For me there would be very important markers to see if we are moving in a new direction and a definitive decision in Rody's case would be one. If they make a definitive ruling in her case, I mean after she spent ten years in this limbo, all these women behind Rody who have been waiting in a similar limbo, that is going to be a positive step.[22] We've had little steps here in Miami. Some of the raids have stopped. They are not raiding people's homes as much. Still, you have to fear that the more conservative elements of the country might prevail because they are so verbal.

EP: In reading both FIAC and HRF reports it is clear that the current system of immigration detention is ineffective and that additional (more humane) alternatives to detention need to be implemented. It's a violation of international law not to mention a gross violation of human rights to incarcerate asylum seekers who arrive in this country without proper documentation. I don't know how the new administration and Secretary Janet Napolitano think of reforming these laws. But one thing is certain: what these reports continue to tell us is how expensive the overall costs of detention are and how much cheaper it would be to have alternative programs to incarcerations. It will be interesting to see if this is going to happen.

ED: And these reports have been circulating for a long time.

EP: Yes, exactly, and with each new report we keep getting updates on the cost of detention, including of course the human cost. What happened to your uncle undoubtedly challenged your allegiance to this country, a country that rejected and cruelly abandoned a person so close to your heart. In a 2004 *Guardian* interview, you said, "I live in a country from which my uncle was catastrophically rejected and come from one which he had to flee. . . . I am wrestling with the fact that both countries let him down."[23] How would you describe your relationship to the United States today?

ED: After *Brother, I'm Dying* came out, people kept asking me, Are you angry with the United States? I am angry at the people who put my uncle through hell, not at the entire country. I see the writing of the book, the fact that I was able to tell my own story, as part of a process of encouraging change in the policies that allowed my uncle to die the way he did. The birth of

22 In December 2009, Rody Alvarado was finally granted asylum, opening the possibility for women fleeing domestic violence to be granted asylum based on gender. For the update report, see "Documents and Information on Rody Alvarado's Claim for Asylum in the US," Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, http://cgrs.uchastings.edu/campaigns/alvarado.php (accessed 11 June 2011).

23 Edwidge Danticat, quoted in Maya Jaggi, "Island Memories," *Guardian*, 20 November 2004, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/nov/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview9.

my children in the United States made me feel, if anything, more American. Suddenly I have a lineage here. I have American children and the fact that it happened around the same time my uncle was being rejected from this country did make me think a lot about the complications of living in this country at that particular time. You have one foot that's digging in deeper and another one that's being yanked out, maybe that's sort of a new definition of Americanness in this age of immigration controversies. There is a passage from *A Hundred Years of Solitude* when Colonel Buendía says, "We have still had not a death." Somebody has to be dead and buried in the ground for us to belong here. Something like that. The flip side is somebody has to be born in a place to start creating the next generation. By both definitions I was becoming either more American or less American, but I think it helped to redefine what it means to be not just an immigrant but a new American. My daughter will always have been born in Miami the year after my uncle died in immigration custody there. So my daughter's understanding of the time and place in which she was born will always be tied to my uncle's death. So it's more nuanced for me than it has ever been before, this issue of becoming American. If my children had just been born without this complication it might have been more cheerful, it might have been simpler.

EP: Speaking of homes and homelands, Michelle Cliff writes, "Although I have lived in the United States and in England, I travel as a Jamaican. It is Jamaica that forms my writing for the most part, and which has formed for the most part, myself. Even though I often feel what Derek Walcott expresses in his poem . . . 'I had no nation now but the imagination.' It is a complicated business."[24] Which aspect of your experience do you recognize in Cliff's words?

ED: Of course, it's a very complicated business. I've always liked this notion of nation as *imagi*-nation because I think for a lot of us that's all we have left. Imagine if I were the sort of blissful immigrant waving my flag and this thing happened, it would have definitely brought me back to no nation but imagination. Either way I would've landed on the ground really hard. If you are a writer at least you get to create your nation both in your imagination and on paper. I think that's a very wonderful and comforting idea.

EP: Well, with Cliff in particular I find it very interesting when people criticize her because she hasn't been back to Jamaica in a long time. They question her sense of Jamaicanness, but then Cliff says that she doesn't go back to Jamaica because she finds it a "repellently homophobic society," and she feels she has no place there.[25] So she hasn't been back . . . as far as I know. I have heard people both in Kingston and in the United States challenge her sense of Jamaican identity. But that's the problem with this whole matter, isn't it? When somebody moves to another country and for some reason is prevented from returning to the native place, the question of belonging takes up a whole new significance. As does the question of

24 Michelle Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1985), 12. Cliff references Walcott's poem "The Schooner Flight."

25 Meryl Schwartz and Michelle Cliff, "An Interview with Michelle Cliff," *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 4 (1993): 601.

allegiance. Borrowing the Rasta expression "I and I," Cliff explains her connection to Jamaica: "I and Jamaica is who I am," she says, despite her US residency.[26] I find this expression very interesting because it raises the question of whether you need to live within the bounded territory of a nation to feel a deep cultural and emotional connection to the place.

ED: Julia Alvarez has an essay titled "Doña Aída, with Your Permission," in her book *Something to Declare*. It's a very interesting essay. She talks about going back to the Dominican Republic and meeting Aída Cartagena Portalatín, the grande dame of letters in the Dominican Republic, who tells her, Come back to your people, come back to your country, write in Spanish. So she writes this essay, "Doña Aída, with Your Permission," in which she says, "Well, you know, I live on the hyphen."[27] Before, when I was just starting to write, I would go to conferences where people sort of debated what I am. As I've gotten older and I've met more people who live on that hyphen, as Julia says, this seems less and less like something strange. There are so many of us just like that. Some people feel that they can wound you by saying you're inauthentic. Of course I'm inauthentic. Duh! It's the immigrant's reality and I am an immigrant. I am inauthentic here. And I am inauthentic there. Let's put all this to rest right now. Inauthenticity is my life and it's a perfect place for me to do the kind of writing I want to do. If you're inauthentic, you can make your own rules, which suits me just fine. You don't have to follow anybody's playbook for authenticity. You can create your own rules from your little middle place. From your hyphen. Let's all just celebrate that and let each other live, write, and be, in peace. Last May I went to the Calabash literary festival in Jamaica and the poet Staceyann Chin—she wrote a book called *The Other Side of Paradise*—was there. She's Jamaican and Chinese. She is very out. She is like a rock star. She was on *Def Poetry Jam*, the Broadway show. She was once on Oprah talking about homophobia in Jamaica and she got death threats. It was interesting to see her read in Jamaica because after she read her poetry, some of the older women I was sitting next to were saying to each other, "She's brave, man." Her work is filled with all this vulnerability mixed with all this rage and she fights back with who she is, with what she writes. I respect her and I respect Michelle. They each do it in their own way.

EP: I think things are changing to a certain degree in Jamaica. It is interesting for instance to consider how popular culture is bringing to the forefront issues of sexual orientation and how artists these days are using music to fight homophobic sentiments and behaviors. In light of the controversy over Buju Banton's lyrics and dancehall in general, this is certainly a hopeful change of direction.

ED: Oh yes, there are probably more and more people coming out, but it's interesting, again going back to Rody's and other cases, it's heartbreaking this notion that you can be exiled for

26 Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind*, 12.
27 See Julia Alvarez, "Doña Aída, with Your Permission," *Something to Declare* (New York: Plume, 1999).

your gender or sexual orientation. (Rody is seeking asylum on domestic violence grounds not these other grounds.) But you're still not afforded protection based on them.

EP: I am fascinated by your linguistic background and the overall transformation that occurs in your writing. In Haiti, you spoke Creole at home and wrote in French at school. Then you moved to the United States and immersed yourself into English, which became the language of your writing. You once said, "I always think of the translation as a retranslation anyway because I am transferring an image in my head onto the page."[28] How does this particular act of retranslation complicate the writing process since you do write in a language that is not your native language?

ED: Well, it has become automatic. I've never really written in Creole or in French. When I say to people, if I'd gone to Spain as a child I'd probably be writing in Spanish, I mean it. I would love to explore how this functions in the lives and works for other writers. When I'm writing I know that my characters are not speaking English, but the writing comes out in English with some Creole flavor.

EP: Have you received any criticism from the Haitian community for writing in English?

ED: Yes. Some people think it's all about money. One can argue that—and it was for me—French is as much a foreign language to many Haitians as English is. When I started writing, one of the reasons I wanted to have a large body of work was so that I could have a diversity of ideas and themes in my work. More than language, what I get the most criticism for is this issue of representation. People will sometimes say, "Oh, we are not like this, this is not us, what is this? Who are you writing about? Haitians don't do this, Haitians don't do that."

EP: So the criticism about representation comes from Haitians in Haiti or from Haitians in the United States?

ED: From both. But I think people are responding, when they say these things, to another problematic reaction. When you belong to a minority group, even when you write fiction, people think it's sociology or anthropology. My belief is that language is a tool: you use it, if you are writer, in ways that can express your experience. It's the same if you were a painter. You use the tools that are available to you, and this is what was available to me within my experience. But the older you get and the more you do this, the less you feel like you have to explain, at least the less I feel like I do. I share the experience of having been born in Haiti and coming to the United States with so many other people. It's not really an anomaly anymore.

28 Edwidge Danticat, "Voices from Hispaniola: A Meridians Roundtable with Edwidge Danticat, Loida Maritza Perez, Myriam J. A. Chancy, and Nelly Rosario," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5, no 1 (2004): 84.

EP: Do you speak Creole to your children? And what are the challenges in passing such a powerful legacy as a mother tongue on to the next generation while living in a country where the pressure to assimilate is so strong?

ED: Yes, I speak Creole to them, but I admit I lapse. We don't always do it consistently, but their grandmothers are with them a lot, so they hear a lot of Creole. There is a common joke about this Haitian American kid who does not speak Creole. The kid goes to Haiti and asks for some water. The word *wate* in Creole means "bathroom," so rather than getting some water, the kid gets shown the toilet every time. [*laughs*] I am terrified of that happening to my kids.

EP: That's very funny. The reason I was asking about Creole is because I see a lot of parallels with the linguistic situation in Italy. Within the same country, you find people who often are bi- or trilingual, speaking both the official national language and the various regional dialects. But speaking the dialect in most cases means to be subjected to social class stigmatization. If you speak the dialect, you are most likely from a rural area and you are not perceived as being as wealthy and/or educated as people who live in the cities. It makes me think of a similar situation in California among Mexican students. They don't speak Spanish because of the level of discrimination that comes with it. Speaking English, for these children of immigrants, becomes a powerful signifier of belonging to the United States.

ED: Have you read Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*? I mean, that's such an interesting narrative about private language versus public language.[29] There are a lot of children who were born right here in Miami, for example, who, when they go to school is the first time they speak English.

EP: That happens in California as well. But in California you also have a high level of discrimination in the school system, as a result of Prop 227, the 1998 anti-bilingual education law. Children from Spanish-speaking parents who speak perfect, unaccented English often end up in ESL programs. The level of discrimination against the Latino community is so intense that it often results in a de facto linguistic segregation. . . .

Language inevitably leads to heritage. Caryl Phillips's recently published novel, *In the Falling Snow*, addresses the migrant question, particularly the resistance on the part of the first-generation children born in the United Kingdom toward their Caribbean ancestry.[30] Here you have a teenager son who prefers to go to Barcelona with his friends rather than back to the Caribbean with his father. The first generation, Phillips suggests, has a deeper sense of belonging to the new country and therefore a less emotional need to explore the immigrant past. Would you agree with that?

29 Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York: Bantam, 1982).
30 Caryl Phillips, *In the Falling Snow* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

ED: It all depends on the new generation's personal interaction with the place, I think. The most you can do is try to expose them to culture and give them positive experiences in it. If they have fun there, they will go, but if it's like History Lesson 101, they may not want to go. It's very hard to predict what they will want. I'm sure that if it was presented to these kids like, "Oh, you know, we're going to have a great party for Christmas or something" [*laughs*], it is just the framing often, instead of this idea of the ancestral home being a burden that keeps them from going skiing with their friends.

EP: But then, sometimes, all of a sudden they do show interest.

ED: Yes, I see a lot of college students who become very interested in their parents' culture when they start college. Suddenly they are reciting historical facts as if nobody ever heard of it before.

EP: I particularly enjoyed reading the *Callaloo* interview in which you discussed the connections between food, memory, and home. "Every meal is a reminder that we're not home," you said.[31] There is so much emphasis on food in your fiction that I feel like a reader is automatically made to travel to Haiti and to Haiti's flavors, even though she or he has actually never visited the island. Could you talk more about the centrality of food in Haitian culture?

ED: You know, that interview was very interesting. I did a little piece for the *New Yorker* about hunger, and, especially if you are poor, in Haiti food is such a status symbol. I mean, I remember being a kid and if there were certain foods that you were eating—you know, cornmeal, it's not quite polenta, but something like that—when you were eating that you didn't want people to see because there is such a thing as poor people's food and rich people's food, and if you were eating cornmeal you were eating the poor people's food and you didn't want the neighbors to see you eating it. We ate a lot of cornmeal when I was a kid. So this whole issue of status around food, of people knowing hunger, knowing that sometimes, even when things are good, there are people who are hungry around you, but also the way that people come together around food as a sort of a cultural place—all of this was to me very interesting. Ethnic writing is always accused of that. People would say, "Oh, this is the formula for immigrant writers. They throw in some spices, they throw in some food, they throw in storytelling." But I think that in a place like Haiti, where food for a lot of people is lacking, food is very central, cultural, and political. In Haiti political fat cats are sometimes called "big-eaters," *gran mangè*. They used to have this soda in Haiti, this huge bottle of super-sweet soda and people started calling them the gran mangè, and they had songs about the gran mangè. There will always be gran mangè because you have all these people who are not eating. Last year, for example, you had news circulating about people eating these mud cookies and then you had food riots

31 Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "Dyasporic Appetites and Longings: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat," *Callaloo* 30, no 1 (2007): 26–39.

and so forth. Food would be very politicized in any culture where you have people starving and others just living off the hog; I mean, the contrast is literal and figurative at the same time.

EP: That is interesting. But I think that the cultural aspect of food is important, too, because there are cultures in which food is a symbol of social interaction.

ED: In Haiti it is as well. But the interaction goes only so far, because people are not always eating. People don't always have enough to eat. But when you do eat, you share it with your family and friends. You act out your rituals. My beloved friend, whom I quote often, the novelist Dany Laferrière, wrote in his last novel, *L'énigme du retour*, that the great Haitian novel would be about hunger, but hungry people don't write novels.[32] Food is the primal preoccupation of a person when you wake up in the morning and have no idea what you're going to eat or what you're going to feed your children. I've been there. I've seen grown-ups scramble to try to feed a small tribe of us. Food loses all its cultural and symbolic significance in that setting. You will be like Jean Valjean: you would steal—or perhaps even kill—for bread.

EP: You recently appeared in the role of narrator in the film *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*. Could you talk about the experience of being in this film?[33]

ED: I was asked to do it and I was so very happy to. I loved the film and I loved listening to all these Haitian women tell their stories in their own voices. Poor women don't often get heard, even within Haiti. So I loved hearing the voices in the film. These women are so intelligent, so incredible. Simply amazing.

EP: I agree. If you think of the images we always have of Haiti, to finally have a film in which you hear Haitian women telling their own stories, stories of how they live on a daily basis, the struggles they face, but also their strength, courage, and determination, I think that's very empowering. These images need to circulate, too.

ED: Yes, and their own voices. I think it's very important.

EP: I have heard that the idea for the film came from the women because the filmmakers originally were thinking of a book, but then the women said, "No, no, we want a film," obviously realizing the power of film in conveying certain messages.

ED: Even if they don't read and write they can still participate in it; they can tell that story. They can show it to others. In that way a film is more democratic than a book.

EP: Edouard Glissant argues that "because the collective memory in the Caribbean was too often wiped out, the Caribbean writer must 'dig deep' into this memory."[34] Glissant is calling for

32 See Dany Laferrière, *L'énigme du retour* (Montreal: Boréal, 2009).
33 *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*, dir. Mark Schuller and Renée Bergan, Tèt Ansanm Productions, 2009.
34 Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 64.

creative writers to complement the work of historians, a call that you seem to have embraced quite seriously. Can you talk about this double role of historian/creative writer in *The Farming of Bones* and the kind of research that went with it?[35]

ED: I became interested in that story, the story of the massacre, as we were approaching the fifty-year anniversary of the massacre, in 1987. I started thinking about it, and then I met in the early 1990s a painter, Ernst Prophète, who painted the event in this incredible painting called *My Grandmother Told Me That the Massacre River Runs with Blood*. My wonderful friend Jonathan Demme recently gave me that painting as a gift, the painting that inspired the book. It was a wonderful gift for more reasons that I can even express. So after 1987, I started doing research, just reading about the massacre, and I was trying to read it from both sides, the points of view of both Dominicans and Haitians, but it was really hard to find much documentation on the Haitian side. I tried to find everything that was written about the massacre, and I traveled to both Haiti and the DR a couple of times, to actually see the physical places and to just talk to people on the border and in the area, in Dajabon, the area that I wanted to set the book in. At some point you really had to let the imagination take over. I also liked the idea of testimony, because I felt that in the research that I was doing, that's what was lacking. People were saying, "You know, there are few direct testimonials," and that's where I felt I needed to create these testimonials in the novel, because that's almost what I wished I had when I started.

EP: In *The Tears of Hispaniola* Lucia Suárez writes that "the politics of silence—or rather denial—have been dominant in Dominican memory."[36] She mentions how *The Farming of Bones* was criticized in the Dominican Republic for being biased toward Haitian accounts. It's interesting now to hear you talking about the lack of documentation in Haiti about the massacre and to think of the novel as a form of historical record of the event.

ED: When the book came out I got official letters from Dominican consulates all over the United States, saying, "Oh, it's not fair because it was not the citizenship that participated in the massacres," and it's funny because all these Haitians, on the other hand, were saying that I didn't go far enough. I owe, however, a great debt to Bernado Vega, an amazing scholar and human being, who lent me some materials for my research, in spite of what it could mean eventually for the story and the Dominican Republic. I have always wished that I could be that kind of person in his place, a person for whom historical integrity is so important. Julia Alvarez was the same. She is someone I love and admire greatly. She was extremely supportive very early, as were many of my other Dominican writer friends. But for many other Dominicans even the idea of the book was too biased. The balance of trying to create characters that were believable was challenging. Some of the American reviewers were saying this one is too good, this one

35 Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* (New York: Soho, 1998).
36 Lucia Suárez, *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (Miami: University of Florida Press, 2006), 7.

is too evil, victims and killers and so forth, so it was very interesting. In a way I feel like this is really the last novel I did from the beginning to the end. I've not really done novels—*The Dew Breaker* is not really a novel—ever since, so I guess I'm long overdue [*laughs*] for a novel. But it was such an interesting journey for me, I mean, the whole book starting from ideas from the beginning and sorting out where to enter the story and being much aware of this political weight because it was so sensitive for so many people; the Dominican people, the official people became so sensitive about their portrayal. And the Haitians, who wanted me to be much more brutal in my depictions.

EP: What is interesting to me is the fact that we always have this idea of history as a sort of master narrative, an objective account. We tend to forget that history is always biased. History is a story after all.

ED: Of course, just the idea of "I" is laughable, or somebody saying it's biased. Of course it is biased. How can you not be biased? Everything demands a point of view. I felt like I had done a good job when both sides were angry for their different reasons. What I tried to do was to create human beings, but of course there is a perspective, there is a point of view.

EP: How about the 2007 film on the exploitation of Haitian cane cutters at the border?

ED: Yes, there were actually two films that year: *The Price of Sugar* and *The Sugar Babies*, which I narrated, and both created a heated controversy among the Dominican community, not to mention stark opposition on the part of the sugar industry. [37]

EP: *The Dew Breaker*, you said, was an interesting break from your previously published work because it is a book about men, but it's also book in which women have a prominent role as storytellers.[38] In the case of "The Dew Breaker," for instance, it's Ka who bears the responsibility of telling her father's story; as a matter of fact, she is referred to as the narrator or a pantomime. What force enables her telling, which I see as a form of catharsis?

ED: It's again this drive, this attempt at definition. We were talking earlier indirectly about legacy. When you are a child of immigrants sometimes you're not sure what to do with the legacy. Should I ignore it or just revel in it? You are given this nostalgia that your parents have, "Oh, it was so beautiful, it was so wonderful," and then, "Oh yeah, they're kidnapping people there these days." So you have the parents saying that Haiti is both a sort of paradise and an awful place at the same time, and Ka gets that in "The Dew Breaker" but she also gets the sad truth: "Oh, by the way, one of the people who made it hell was your father." I'm intrigued by ambiguity more than clarity, and I think this is definitely a book where there's a lot of ambiguity, a search for the truth. One of the things that Ka says in the book is that you can spend your

37 *The Price of Sugar*, dir. Bill Haney, Uncommon Productions, 2007; *The Sugar Babies*, dir. Amy Serrano, Siren Studios, 2007.

38 Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

whole life with your parents and if you don't hear other people say things, you may not know anything about them, especially if they're not big talkers. You know, somebody might say, "Oh, your dad was really a rascal when he was young"; your dad might not say, "Oh, I was a real rascal." Ka has these fragments of her experience with her parents, who have these things to hide and go through all this trouble to hide them. So the whole point of the book for me was defining this one man from all these different perspectives, that all these people know these little bits of, and then trying to put those fragments together into a man and have him see himself, have his family see him, have these strangers see him, all through their own prisms.

EP: How did the structure come about? As I was reading the book, I wondered whether the structure had been planned before the narrative actually began or whether it just came as you were writing it.

ED: It came as I was writing. I wrote "The Book of the Dead," the opening story, first. I don't think it is the strongest story in the book but I loved that story. And then I wrote the end, that long section of the prison, and I thought, "Oh, it would be interesting to find out what exactly he did." And then I wrote the middle story, "The Book of Miracles," about these parallel killers of different periods, you know, the older killer looking at the younger killer. And I had always wanted to write a Christmas story because we used to live next to this Catholic church in Brooklyn, and even though I am not Catholic I would sometimes go to mass there just because it was there, and I always wanted to write a story about Christmas mass there and all the magical things that the priest said during the mass, because the ritual was just so extraordinary to me, and so I wrote that and these others just sprang up around it. And all these people were connected tangentially. When we were going to publish the book, Robin Desser, my superbrilliant editor, said, "We won't put anything in the cover; we'll just say fiction or whatever and let people decide what it is," and I just felt like even that fit in the structure. But the structure kind of sprang up, and then I started liking each story more than the other as I was writing it.

EP: Well, in all this discussion about genres in Caribbean literature, here comes George Lamming at the 2008 Caribbean Studies Association Conference in Kingston, who said, "I'm not really a novelist, I just write narratives." I think that's true for most Caribbean-born writers, whether we are talking about an earlier generation such as Lamming, Selvon, and Naipaul, or younger writers such as Phillips, Dionne Brandt, Julia Alvarez, and yourself.

ED: Within the Caribbean tradition, yes, we do restructure the novel all the time. I think of authors such as Junot Diaz, Paule Marshall, Dany Laferrière, Patrick Chamoiseau, Michelle Cliff, and Jamaica Kincaid. Julia Alvarez and George, too, help us redefine the novel all the time, with our traditions, our narratives in mind.

EP: Do you start with characters talking to you, images, or specific scenes?

ED: It depends. Sometimes you start with just a line, sometimes it's a character, sometimes it's one scene. I've had for a long time this idea of this woman just plunging off a particular building in Miami, and I just wrote this scene. And sometimes you're just stuck in this scene until you're writing another story, and you realize, "Oh, *that's* where it belongs." So it's different, it's different all the time.

EP: *The Dew Breaker* has sparked interesting conversations on the themes of redemption and forgetting. You said that Ka's question to her mother, "Manman, how do you love him?," is central to understand the nature of the book. Could you elaborate on that? How can we love and forgive people such as the dew breaker?

ED: Oh, yes, people do love them. I sometimes go to speak to schools and based on where I am, some kids will say, "Oh, my father was a *macoute*." They say it so casually because it doesn't mean the same thing to them; they don't know the history all that well. Of course these people are loved by other people, you know; they don't have horns. For whatever reason, they have compartmentalized their lives, and they can kill people and then go home to sleep with their wives and play with their children. That's what I wanted to show. I mean, it sounds banal, but they could have been any one of us. So that's the feeling I wanted the reader to come away with more than anything else.

EP: But even his wife, knowing what he did, she still loves him. And that love is transmitted to us readers, I guess. Once we get to the end of the story, once we find out the truth, we still sympathize with him, and that's the question. How can you have any sympathy for such a person?

ED: I didn't want to make him this person who had groveled for forgiveness either. So it's not like he was at the knee of the wife saying, "Oh, god, I've been so bad." It's fragile, this kind of redemption. Perhaps if he had remained in Haiti, he might've done what a lot of people do, who go from one kind of bad group to another. This one closes down, they go to the next one, they go to the next one. And he might've been one of these people, but he was able to remove himself from it, so migration in this case worked in his favor.

EP: In the afterword you wrote to the paperback edition of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, you clarified that the novel is not a study of Haitian women and asked that the singularity of Sophie's experience "be allowed to exist." While I don't see Sophie as representative of all Haitian women, I can't help but think of other forms of "testing" that women in various cultures undergo. I am thinking specifically about female genital cutting [FGC], a practice also perpetuated by women on women in the name of tradition. You actually make this connection through the character of Buki, the Ethiopian college student who becomes part of the sexual phobia group at the end of the novel. Were you trying to internationalize acts of violence against women through this group?

ED: You know, that book, like all first novels, it has everything but the kitchen sink. [*both laugh*] I had just read Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secrets of Joy*, and I was trying to connect all these things.[39] To me the idea of women having to be virgins, especially in stratified societies where marriage is the ultimate goal, was just burning in my brain. I had just read also the agnostic gospels where a midwife tests the Virgin Mary and the midwife's hand withers. I can't read a lot of the things I've written, and this one I can't read at all, because I was thinking so much, you know, trying to make certain things work through these characters. But I was still a baby writer and I think I laid it all on a bit thick. I can't wait to get another chance at that book. I'd cut a few lines out for sure.

EP: I have shown the film *Warrior Marks* in some of my courses and students always ask about the role of women in perpetuating these patriarchal structures.[40] That's the question that Alice Walker tries to answer through the entire film and you know all the controversy and how she was criticized. Women's active role in this ritual originates, according to Walker, not so much from tradition but because, like anything else involving children, women are the primary caretakers. So that's why women do it, she says.

ED: Have you seen Ousmane Sembène's *Moolaadé*?[41] It's a very different take on female genital cutting. The story is fiction, and it is about this woman who gives sanctuary to these girls who are about to be cut. And by some rule they have to respect it but the whole town is awkward about it. At the end they come to some realization that genital cutting is wrong. This is different because it was done by an African filmmaker, and it shows other women of the same culture saying, "This is wrong. We will not stand for it."

EP: Yes, and I have shown another documentary, which addresses feminist questions in a global context, and there is a section on FGC. It's titled *The Shape of Water* and is directed by Kum Kum Bhavnani.[42]

ED: Oh yes, I worked on that film. I worked with her on the script.

EP: It's a very interesting film. Like Sembène's, it's a different take on the issue because it shows also women from within the culture saying, "No, this is wrong. We should stop it." I love the way how Bhavnani connected all the stories. It's really powerful.

ED: Yes, very effective.

EP: In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the village of Dame Marie is a site of violence for both Martine and Sophie, but it is also a site of liberation, thanks to the legacy of stories that have

39 Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992).
40 *Warrior Marks*, dir. Pratibha Parmar and Alice Walker, Women Make Movies, 1993.
41 *Moolaadé*, dir. Ousmane Sembène, 2004.
42 *The Shape of Water*, dir. Kum Kum Bhavnani, 2006.

been passed on by women like Granme Ife. Where does Sophie stand on this line of female storytellers, and how is this tradition going to continue across the sea, with migration?

ED: Well, you know, the book is Sophie's story, so she ends up being the most triumphant of the storytellers. I wanted the book to be like hearing somebody tell their story out of breath. So Sophie's narrative is both oral and written. I was a lot more theoretical then in my framework. [*laughs*]

EP: Well, migration transforms you. It's a process that always brings change, so it is very interesting that Sophie is a different person from her mother, and from her grandmother. She takes that legacy, and the legacy gets changed now. There is a beautiful line in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* that says stories that don't shift and change are "dead things."[43] Silko is right, because with each story comes change and growth; if stories didn't change, cultures would remain static, so what I see in Sophie is a lot of the same process, a lot of that transformation leading to change.

After the Dance is described on the dust jacket as the "lyrical narrative of a writer rediscovering her country along with a part of herself."[44] How was writing this book different from writing your fiction?

ED: It was great. I loved doing it. I've been working on these essays and bringing back some old essays that I've written, reshaping them. They'll be published next fall in a book called *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. It's going to be nonfiction and some reportage, too. I love doing this kind of reportage, nonfiction, gathering stuff, and then seeing what comes out. *After the Dance* was really a lot fun to do. Jacmel is small and big enough that you can put together a narrative around it. It was wonderful to take these trips to Haiti with that kind of goal, you know, working and on a project that was a lot of fun.

EP: You are very generous with scholars when it comes to literary interviews and I was wondering if you consider "these conversations" as a complement to your writing, a way to clarify questions about your writing and/or your life that you would not normally have time to think of. Could you talk more about this process?

ED: Well, I think it's almost like a shadow of the work, the interview. When it is not getting in the way of actual work. The interview sometimes allows me to connect things that I didn't realize were connected, because obviously the person interviewing is reading the work consecutively and they'll see patterns that I'm not yet able to see.

EP: It's like with students, you know. Sometimes you teach a book that you've read so many times, but the students, who read it for the first time, they see things with a whole fresh

43 "Things which don't shift and grow are dead things." Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 126.
44 Edwidge Danticat, *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (New York: Crown, 2002).

perspective. They ask all these interesting questions and you think, "How come I've never thought of that?"

ED: Exactly. It gives you an opportunity to see things from a different angle. And sometimes people say things in these interviews that help you step back and look at your work as a total entity, if you will. In a way the interview is like x-raying yourself, because of course it's less comfortable for writers to sit down and think, "Let me write a paper about my process." There is no discovery in that sort of summation but if you're in these conversations, they give you another voice to respond to. I do some of these interviews with other writers. I did two for *BOMB*, with Evelyne Trouillot and Junot Diaz, and it's interesting to be on the other end of it as well.

EP: What do you learn when you interview other writers?

ED: I'm very interested in other people's creative processes and seeing their progression. If you write yourself, you know that there is this aspect of the process that is undefinable, this mystery element of it. So you're not going to get definite answers about anything, but you just want to see how other people are carving away at it, how they try to do it. It's a window on another person's process that may be comforting when you're doing your own writing. Because, ultimately, writing is so solitary, and we all want to feel like we are alone in the room. But you still want to feel that there are other interested voices in there with us, whether it's a writer you just read or your ideal future reader.

EP: There is among literature practitioners a sense of discouragement these days, in the era of Google, YouTube, Twitter, and so forth. It is undeniable, the fact that the way of disseminating stories has changed, and that the act of reading literature seems less important today than it was in the past. As a writer, do you feel somehow intimidated by this cyberspace audience?

ED: It depends. I feel like I would do what I do no matter what. I certainly hope there are people at the other end to read my work, but I would do this regardless. While uncharted territory lies ahead, with e-books, and so forth, the truth is that there will always be people who read, and that's why I am not totally discouraged.

EP: Thank you. That's very reassuring. . . .

Bill Clinton was recently nominated special UN envoy to Haiti. "All I want to do is help the Haitians take over control of their own destiny. It's all I have ever wanted for Haiti," Clinton said in a UN press release.[45] What do you expect from the international community and the United States for the future of your native country?

45 UN News Centre, "Haiti Has Best Chance in Decades for Development—UN Envoy Bill Clinton," 15 June 2009, http://wwwupdate.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=31143&Cr=haiti&Cr1=.

ED: Haitians have to ultimately take charge of their destiny. Haiti needs the international community, but it has to be a kind of model where you're teaching people to fish, as opposed to just giving them a fish, to follow that proverb.

EP: It's interesting because that is also the response you hear when you consider questions of sovereignty, development, and democracy in the Caribbean today. No charity but development from within, and the freedom for Caribbean people to determine their own future.

ED: Yes. But the tricky thing is when people do take charge of their destiny and the dominant powers don't like it and they take it back by force. They say, "You didn't vote the way we wanted you to," or, "You know the guy in power is not our guy." So the big nations don't always want the small ones to have real control of their destiny. We have seen that repeated over and over in Haiti: twice with Jean-Bertrand Aristide, for example. Then you also see it happen all over the world, over and over again.

EP: Thank you. It's been a great pleasure talking to you.

ED: You're very welcome.

Postscript

"From now on," Danticat writes in "Our Guernica," the final chapter in *Create Dangerously*, "there will always be the Haiti before the earthquake and the Haiti of after the earthquake. And after the earthquake, the way we read and the way we write, both inside and outside Haiti, will never be the same."[46]

Upon hearing of the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti on 12 January 2010, my first thought went to Danticat and her family, to colleagues I had come to meet over the years, most of whom, like Danticat, live in the United States, and to the thousands of Haitians whom I will never know but about whom I have been reading through Danticat's (and other writers') works. I remember seeing Danticat on CNN the night we first heard the news. I remember sending an e-mail to let her know that I was thinking of her and her beloved ones, praying that they would be all right. I remember feeling numb in the face of so much devastation. In the aftermath of the earthquake, I often thought about this conversation, wondering how different my questions (and her answers) would have been had they been asked after that tragic 12 January.

In February 2010 the *New Yorker* published an article by Danticat titled "A Little While."[47] It's a moving description of the death of her cousin Maxo, whose house collapsed on top of him, but also a humble reflection on the author's sense of guilt for not being able to be with her family during those tragic moments. I remember a great feeling of sadness and loss after

46 Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 162.

47 Edwidge Danticat, "A Little While," *New Yorker*, 1 February 1, 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2010/02/01/100201taco_talk_danticat. The article was partially reprinted in "Our Guernica," *Create Dangerously*, 153–73.

reading this article. I felt as if I almost knew Maxo, for I had read about him in *Brother, I'm Dying.* Maxo, the son of Danticat's reverend uncle, was detained with his father at Krome processing center in October 2004. Danticat writes that Maxo had returned to Haiti "after his asylum petition was denied."[48] I thought (with a mix of anger and grief) that, had he been granted asylum in the United States, Maxo (like many other nameless Haitians) might be alive today. In the Haiti after the earthquake, one would hope that the draconian immigration measures enacted after 9/11 by the Department of Homeland Security would have been eased and that Haitians requesting asylum would not still be kept in detention when arriving without proper documentation.[49] More significant, in the Haiti after the earthquake, one would hope that US Customs and Border Protection officers would not question whether a Haitian holding a valid US passport is indeed is a legal citizen.[50] Danticat writes,

> Perhaps we will write with the same fervor and intensity (or even more) as before. Perhaps we will write with the same sense of fearlessness or hope. Perhaps we will continue to create as dangerously as possible, but our muse has been irreparably altered. Our people, both inside and outside of Haiti, have changed. In ways that I am not yet fully capable of describing, we artists too have changed.[51]

And we readers have changed too. In the Haiti after the earthquake we will continue to read Haitian writers from the dyaspora "with the same sense of fearlessness or hope," as they continue to bear witness to a country they love and which in return loves them. We will continue to read "dangerously" an author such as Edwidge Danticat, who has often been accused of being "inauthentic" for writing in English but who graciously reminds us that from the ambivalent/complex/uncomfortable position of the "hyphen," which so many immigrant writers today inhabit, great art comes.

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48 Ibid., 155.

49 In March 2010, an article published in the *New York Times* told the story of thirty Haitian survivors who, in the chaotic aftermath of the earthquake, were rushed onto planes by Marines but who, upon landing in Miami, were locked up in jail for lack of proper documentation. None of them had "criminal histories," Nina Bernstein reported. See Nina Bernstein, "Rushed from Haiti, Then Jailed for Lacking Visas," *New York Times*, 31 March 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/01/us/01detain.html.

50 Danticat recounts that at the Toussaint Louverture Airport, upon leaving Haiti after her first short trip following the earthquake, a US Customs and Border Protection officer asks her to remove her glasses, while holding the passport up to the sunlight to make sure that it is not "a fake." See *Create Dangerously*, 172.

51 Ibid., 162.