

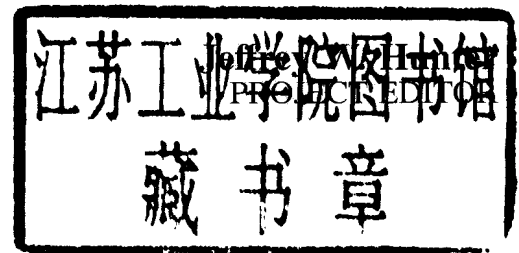
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 228

Volume 228

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Edwidge Danticat

1969-

Haitian novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

The following entry presents criticism of Danticat's work through 2004. For further information on her life and career, see *CLC*, Volumes 94 and 139.

INTRODUCTION

Considered one of the most important contemporary Caribbean-American novelists, Danticat immigrated to the United States from her native Haiti as a child. The ability to straddle cultures and fuse her American and Haitian roots are a hallmark of Danticat's work. Critics have praised her representations of the experience of Haitians both at home and in the United States and her focus on the culture of the Caribbean Diaspora. Danticat's 1994 debut novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, published when she was twenty-five, garnered considerable acclaim. Oprah Winfrey selected the book for her nationally televised and influential book club in 1998. In addition to writing, Danticat is well known for her political activism and support for the National Coalition for Haitian Rights. She paid homage to the activist literary tradition in the epilogue to her book *Krik? Krak!* (1995), noting "In our world, writers are tortured and killed if they are men. Called lying whores, then raped and killed, if they are women." Critic Richard Eder praised her abilities in 2004 when he wrote in the *New York Times* "Danticat has managed over the past ten years to portray with such terrifying wit and flowered pungency the torment of the Haitian people."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1969, and her childhood coincided with the height of the brutal dictatorship of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. When Danticat was four, her parents left Haiti and immigrated to New York City. Her father drove a taxi and her mother worked in a textile factory until they earned enough money to bring their daughter, now twelve, to the United States. She attended New York City public schools, including bilingual programs. Danticat earned a degree in French from Barnard College, where she received the 1995 Woman of Achievement Award, and later earned a master of fine arts degree from Brown University. Her thesis at Brown evolved into the novel

Breath, Eyes, Memory. Danticat's next book, *Krik? Krak!*, a collection of stories, was a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award. Her second novel, *The Farming of Bones* (1998), earned the American Book Award and the Pushcart Prize for short fiction. She was honored with a National Book Critics Circle Award nomination in 2004 and a PEN/Faulkner Award nomination in 2005 for *The Dew Breaker* (2004). *The Dew Breaker* also won the Story Prize, a short fiction award established at the beginning of 2004, and was featured as a *Today Show* Book Club choice. Danticat received a Lannan Literary Fellowship in 2004. In 1996 *Granta* magazine chose her as one of the "20 Best Young American Novelists." In 1999, the *New Yorker* magazine included Danticat in an issue devoted to "The Future of American Fiction." Her stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Callaloo*, and other magazines as well as in the collections *Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. Danticat lives in Miami.

MAJOR WORKS

Breath, Eyes, Memory is the story of Sophie Caco, who travels from Haiti to New York to be reunited with her mother, Martine. Sophie is the product of Martine's rape at age sixteen by a member of the Tonton Macoute, the vicious enforcers of the Duvalier regime. Martine had fled to New York and Sophie was raised by family in Haiti until her mother sent for her. When Sophie rejoins her mother against her will, Martine sexually violates Sophie in the same manner that her own mother violated her, by manually testing that Sophie's virginity is intact. Just as Martine's testing ended with a violent act (the rape), Sophie's testing ends when she breaks her own hymen—an act of self-mutilation designed to end the cycle of sexual violation that Danticat describes in the novel as "passed on through generations like heirlooms." *Breath, Eyes, Memory* does not follow a linear timeline and moves back and forth between Haiti and the United States. Sophie fails to save her mother from self-destruction, but she marries, has a daughter, and returns to Haiti to confront her family's past. Danticat's novel illustrates Haiti's long struggle as a nation by portraying a family's struggle across generations.

Danticat's next work, *Krik? Krak!*, is a collection of nine stories. In "Between the Pool and the Gardenias," a servant girl adopts a dead baby she finds in the street;

"Nineteen Thirty-Seven" tells of the brutal treatment of a woman who is suspected of witchcraft; and "The Missing Peace" recounts the tale of a young girl who helps an American journalist search for her missing mother. The collection's title recalls a traditional Haitian storytelling ritual: when a storyteller asks "Krik?" the audience must respond "Krak!" to urge the storyteller to proceed. Danticat's next novel, *The Farming of Bones*, takes an historical event as its basis: the 1937 slaughter of thousands of Haitian sugar cane cutters ordered by Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo. Danticat tells this story through the character of Amabelle Desir, who at age eight witnesses her parents' drowning while trying to cross the river back into Haiti. She is rescued by Don Ignacio, who takes her into his house, where Amabelle lives as the companion and servant to Ignacio's daughter, Valencia. As an adult, Valencia marries Pico Duarte, a soldier in Trujillo's army. She gives birth to twins, symbolic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, twin nations on the shared island of Hispaniola. Valencia's son, of light complexion and named for Trujillo, is representative of the Dominican Republic. Her daughter, the dark-skinned Rosalinda, is linked with Amabelle and Haiti. Despite Don Ignacio's claim that their family is of "pure Spanish blood," Rosalinda's complexion is indicative of the mixed heritage of most Dominicans, including the dictator Trujillo, whose ancestry was part Haitian. When the massacre begins, Amabelle, no longer safe in Valencia's home, flees along with other Haitians attempting the dangerous journey back to Haiti. During the massacre, Dominican soldiers test the ethnicity of anyone with dark skin by forcing them to pronounce the Spanish word for parsley—*perejil*—which requires trilling of the letter "r," something Kreyol-speaking Haitians find difficult. Parsley becomes symbolic of life. Those able to pronounce the word live, while torture and murder greet those who cannot. Amabelle's identity remains torn between the two countries, with images of the plantation system and Amabelle's servitude underscoring cultural, racial, and class differences between Dominicans and Haitians.

Danticat also compiled and edited an anthology of essays and poetry by Haitian-Americans titled *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States* in 2001. The volume contains work by academics, filmmakers, journalists, socialists, activists, writers, and new authors who share the experience of displacement, emigration, and diaspora. In *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (2002), Danticat returns to Haiti in order to experience Carnival, a tradition denied to her in childhood as a result of her strict upbringing. No longer prevented from participating in the spectacle, Danticat explores the revelry and abandon of the event. *After the Dance* describes the various cultural and historic influences on Carnival and offers insight into the deep and diverse

roots of Haitian culture represented in the colorful celebration. In addition, Danticat has written two novels for young adults. *Behind the Mountains* (2002) is the story of thirteen-year-old Celiene's life in Haiti and her journey to join her father in Brooklyn, New York. The semi-autobiographical work includes descriptions of Danticat's own experiences in the book's afterword. Her second novel for young readers, *Anacaona, Golden Flower* (2005), recounts the tale of Anacaona, scion of a royal line and possibly the future ruler of the Taíno people of fifteenth-century Haiti. Anacaona's stories and experiences are presented in a diary-like format which allows the reader to experience European invasion and conquest from a Caribbean viewpoint. Part of Scholastic's "Royal Diaries" series, the book is based on the historical figure of Anacaona and recorded events, but Danticat blends fiction and history to create this hybrid work. The 2005 novel *The Dew Breaker* returns to the familiar landscape of Haiti's more recent past. It concerns a seemingly ordinary Haitian immigrant living in Brooklyn who once belonged to the Tonton Macoute. Called "dew breaker" after the Macoute's practice of attacking just before dawn, while dew still clung to the grass, the novel unfolds through the eyes of others—the man's wife and daughter, other immigrants, and survivors who think they recognize the man. Each person narrates a separate chapter and all contribute to presenting this enigmatic and complicated character, a representative of Haiti's violent past and present.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have applauded Danticat's skill at weaving together diasporic experiences of assimilation with the political and socioeconomic realities of life in Haiti and the United States. Her skillful use of language—often described as lyrical—allows Danticat to relay horrific scenes of cruelty without alienating her audience. Critics consider *Breath, Eyes, Memory* part memoir, since Danticat's childhood experiences mirror those of the book's narrator. After the narrator emigrates to New York, the work becomes entirely fictional, however. *Krik? Krak!*, has been praised for its presentation of an intricate picture of Haitian history in the form of seemingly unconnected short stories. The *Washington Post Book World* noted: "If the news from Haiti is too painful to read, read this book instead and understand the place more deeply than you ever thought possible." *Krik? Krak!* received generally positive reviews, with critics pointing out the strong presence of Haitian folklore throughout the book. However, Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo has argued that Danticat borrows heavily from non-Haitian folkloric traditions as well, and that the book reveals the influence of such prominent African-American writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. N'Zengou-Tayo also calls attention to the

presence of non-folkloric references from popular culture. Some scholars have considered *The Farming of Bones* historical fiction, since the novel takes place during Trujillo's real efforts at ethnic cleansing in the Dominican Republic. Renée Larrier has noted the prominent role of testimony in the book, and posits that Danticat expanded the usual meaning of testimony to go beyond declaration of what one witnesses to include listening and observing as well as reporting—allowing a role for Haitians who survived atrocities but had no audience for their stories. Reviewers have commented that *The Dew Breaker* represents a blend of literary techniques. In the San Francisco *Chronicle* Kate Washington also suggests that the novel “straddles the ever-thinner line between short-story collection and novel.” Throughout her career, Danticat has mined a rich personal and cultural history to produce literature that critics value for its artistry and its importance in shedding light on the labyrinthine issues faced by Haitians. As the writer Paule Marshall wrote concerning *Krik? Krak!*, “These tales more than confirm the promise of [Danticat's] magical first novel. A silenced Haiti has once again found its literary voice.”

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Breath, Eyes, Memory* (novel) 1994
Krik? Krak! (short stories) 1995
The Farming of Bones (novel) 1998
The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States [editor] (essays and poetry) 2001
After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti (nonfiction) 2002
Behind the Mountains (juvenilia) 2002
The Dew Breaker (novel) 2004
Anacaona, Golden Flower (juvenilia) 2005

CRITICISM

Michele Wucker (essay date May-June 2000)

SOURCE: Wucker, Michele. “Edwidge Danticat: A Voice for the Voiceless.” *Americas* 52, no. 3 (May-June 2000): 40-5.

[In the essay below, Wucker discusses Danticat's writing style and her use of a quiet polemical tone in dealing with her subject matter.]

Under a single spotlight on a darkened stage, Edwidge Danticat broke the silence. “Onè,” she called out quietly but firmly. “Respè,” came the answer from the dim as hundreds of voices completed the traditional Haitian greeting: “Honor, Respect.”

On that chilly Manhattan evening early last November, supporters of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights had been waiting for the best-selling writer to arrive to host an annual benefit. She apologized for being late, but nobody seemed to mind terribly. In her slightly accented voice, she introduced the night's agenda: to educate people about the horrors of the *restavek* system. A common practice in Haiti, it is named for the French *rester avec*, “to stay with,” a privilege for which children of poor families are expected to clean chamber pots, wait on the children of their rich hosts, endure beatings, and sleep on nothing more than a cardboard box shoved under the kitchen table.

Then Danticat faded back into the shadows as two Haitian-American children and a young man took turns reading from Jean-Robert Cadet's 1998 autobiography, *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*. Danticat applauded, just barely visible backstage, as Cadet himself walked onstage and read a final passage from the book. Then she joined the readers and presented each one to the audience in a way that made it clear that she considered it to be a privilege to accompany them. The moment was typical of Danticat's personal and literary style: treating harrowing emotional and political material with grace, and honoring the voices of others, whether they be the characters in her books or people in her world.

Published when she was only twenty-five, Danticat's 1994 debut novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, received wide acclaim. The book of short stories and novel that followed have also been heaped with praise from the publishing world. Now, at thirty-one, she's quickly shed the buzz of “prodigy” and lent her literary weight to causes from Haitian immigrant rights to bilingual education to nurturing new voices.

“When I was younger, I thought I would die by the time I was thirty. I don't know why I felt this. I just did. I had a lot of people in my family die young, so maybe that was why,” Danticat recalled in a recent conversation—carried out by e-mail, which is the way she keeps in touch these days because of her grueling schedule of teaching, writing, and public appearances.

“Now I do feel more rested at thirty-one. I feel more at peace with myself. People sometimes say I have an old soul. My friends call me a *ti granmoun*, an old lady. I've been called that since I was ten. So I have never felt like a girl prodigy, and when things started happening with my book, I took that to mean that I could do

this now and move on to something else. I like the process of doing things, and I think as you get older the process begins to mean more than the destination."

For her that process begins with recognizing her roots and expands to giving back to the community of which she is a part. Such commitment is rare among the small part of the population with power and wealth in Danticat's native Haiti, where the haves care little for the have-nots.

Danticat's family came from the have-nots, though they were strong and lucky enough to make something; her parents emigrated to New York when she was four. Her father drove a cab, and her mother worked in a textile factory to raise the money to bring her to the United States when she was twelve. The long separation, combined with the knowledge of her parents' sacrifice, helped make her older than her years: "Always I felt I had to work since my parents worked so hard," she says now. "Even here in America, I have had a job since I was fourteen."

She entered New York City schools, including bilingual programs, which she has credited with nurturing her language skills. She later earned a degree in French literature from Barnard College and a master's in fine arts at Brown University. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of a young girl who also was brought to the United States at a young age; Oprah Winfrey in 1998 selected the novel for her Book Club.

Major publications applaud Danticat's writing as "resonant" (*Village Voice*), "lyrical" (*Ms.*, *Seattle Times*), "lucid" (*New York Newsday*), "elegant" (*Boston Globe*, *Ms.*). In 1996 *Granta* chose her as one of its "20 Best Young American novelists." In 1995 the *New York Times* Magazine named her as one of "30 under 30" creative people to watch. Last summer the *New Yorker* included her in its "The Future of American Fiction" issue.

Profiles of her inevitably include the word "poised," yet this word lacks the nuance to express how Danticat comes across to her public; she professes to be shy but is brave enough to show when the terrible tragedy of her chosen themes overwhelms her, even to be seen crying in public.

The first time I saw Edwidge Danticat was several years ago at Columbia University's Miller Theater, in one of her first readings from *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. She spoke ever so softly; the audience hushed to make room for her voice. She had not yet mastered eye contact, so came across as painfully shy. But even as she looked straight down at her pages, the words hit home, in a chilling passage about a Haitian mother "testing" her daughter to make sure she was still a virgin. By the time she finished, I realized that I had been gripping the side of my chair.

Danticat examines the human spirit under duress; she gives a voice to the people who appear in news photos of Haiti. Her second book, *Krik? Krak!*, which was a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award, is a collection of short stories: letters between a girl and her boyfriend who will die at sea; a servant girl who adopts a dead baby she finds in the street; a woman who escapes a massacre by flying away; a young boy chosen for the hero in a play about the mystical revolutionary leader Boukman. The boy's father falls from a hot-air balloon and dies; despite the revolution that Boukman started, creating the world's first free Black Republic, Haiti's fortunes fell to make it the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Danticat's latest novel, *The Farming of Bones*, revives a tragedy lost in the shadows of history to all but Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share the island of Hispaniola. (Soho Press published it in 1998; it was recently released in Spanish by Norma and in French by Grasset.) In 1937 the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered that his soldiers massacre as many as thirty-five thousand Haitians living on the border. Trujillo wanted to "whiten" the Dominican Republic, the larger Spanish-speaking country to the east. Like Haitians, Dominicans descend from African slaves, but are more likely to have European ancestors and thus slightly lighter skin.

During the massacre, Dominican soldiers demanded that anyone with dark skin pronounce the Spanish word for parsley. Haitians could not pronounce "*perejil*" because its trilled "r" does not exist in the Kreyol language. In *The Farming of Bones*, parsley comes to represent no less than life itself. Bunches of the humble green herb have a symbolic cleansing power "to shed a passing year's dust as a new one dawned, to wash a new infant's hair for the first time and—along with boiled orange leaves—a corpse's remains one final time," Danticat wrote.

The first time Danticat read in public from *The Farming of Bones* was at Double Happiness, a hip bar in downtown Manhattan. Fifteen minutes before the reading, the place was so full that nobody else could come in. When she began, in the softest voice, the room hushed completely. Then, a few paragraphs into a passage about a woman dying in the massacre, her voice seized up and she paused; tears ran down her cheek as she waited for her throat to relax before she started reading again.

As her book tour progressed, Danticat confronted not only the pain of the book, but also a roar of comments from Dominicans and Haitians. "From the first time I mentioned that I was writing this book, I've never had an indifferent nod. People have always felt strongly one way or another," Danticat says. Some Haitians, thrilled

that she was writing about a taboo of history, sent research, photos, books, articles. Others warned her not to distort history. "Some thought my efforts would be better placed in writing something positive and joyful about Haiti, something where we triumph, like the revolution."

Dominicans, who celebrate their independence from Haiti (which occupied the entire island from 1822-44 to keep France and Spain from uniting on the eastern end of the island and retaking Haiti), reacted just as strongly. "Some Dominican friends were very supportive and told me that it was time to unearth this. My friend Junot Díaz [the Dominican-American writer who often reads with Danticat in public and who is active in promoting Dominican-American issues] has always been my biggest cheerleader on this, even before I wrote one word," Danticat says. "Others reminded me about the Haitian occupation and how Haitians then massacred Dominicans." The Dominican contention that animosity is mutual is well taken, but Danticat refuses to accept it as a reason for silence: "We should raise those types of questions as a way of having a dialogue and not as an excuse for avoiding issues."

The most moving moment came at a reading in Miami, where one of the members of the audience was a man who had worked in sugarcane fields in the Dominican Republic. "He had read the book and during the question-and-answer session stood up and told us his story: how he had seen people work, struggle, grow old, die, get arrested, get repatriated in the Dominican *bateyes*. He had gotten out of the work and moved to Miami, and the book had made him remember so much of his work there. At the end of his story, I was crying and he was crying. We were all crying"

Last fall, while she was on tour for the paperback release of the novel, the Dominican Republic expelled somewhere between five thousand and twelve thousand Haitians and black Dominicans in retaliation against a report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights alleging that the rights of Haitian immigrants were being violated. Danticat and Díaz wrote a *New York Times* opinion piece protesting the deportations; Danticat also joined Haitian and Dominican activists for a protest and press conference.

Despite her involvement in the issues behind her writing, Danticat doesn't consider herself an activist in the strict traditional sense. "I want to serve in whatever way I can, and I always will. I think you have to at least try and be part of something larger than yourself, and that's what I try to do with the things I have been part of in the community," she says.

Not only has Danticat denounced human rights abuses on Hispaniola and demonstrated against the New York police brutalizing of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima;

she has also spoken out in favor of immigrant rights and bilingual education, which helped her gain a footing in school while she was still mastering the English language. She's recently served on the board of directors of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights, where she lends her name to campaigns and, with the support of a Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund grant, she has helped NCHR organize cultural programs for the Haitian community, including a series of readings and the Bouki Club, an Internet chat room for Haitian teenagers.

"It's quite interesting to see her continuing to remain simple and modest in her ways, always ready and willing to give credit to others, and at the same time being very comfortable with students and others," says Jocelyn (Johnny) McCalla, NCHR's executive director. One year, he recalled, she traveled with thirty or so Haitian-American students on a two-week educational program in Haiti, where "spartan" would be a generous description of their public-university dorm accommodations. "There she was, even though she was famous, sharing the discomfort, sharing stories, listening to them, being a kid herself."

That experience mirrored the one Danticat has written about from memories of her own childhood experience, which took place amid the joy of a strong Kreyol oral tradition. Grandparents would gather children around and tell stories, especially during the long blackouts that fell over Port-au-Prince when the decrepit Haitian electric company shut down for fuel shortages, lack of maintenance, or politics.

In Haiti's written literary tradition, writing has often been synonymous with activism. Marie Chauvet, a Haitian novelist, died in exile in New York, but the power of her writing about love and madness inspired Danticat by her bravery. Danticat's work also clearly draws on the influence of Jacques Stephen Alexis, whose 1955 masterpiece about Trujillo's massacre of Haitians, *Compère Général Soleil*, has just been published in English as *General Sun, My Brother* on University Press of Virginia's Caraf Books imprint, translated by Carrol F. Coates. A vocal opponent of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. Alexis disappeared and by some accounts was stoned to death.

Danticat's writing pays open homage to this activist tradition, as well as to the role of women. "And writing? Writing was as forbidden as dark rouge on the cheeks or a first date before eighteen. It was an act of indolence, something to be done in a corner when you could have been learning to cook," she wrote in "**Women Like Us**," ["**Epilogue: Women Like Us**"] the epilogue to *Krik? Krak!*. "In our world, if you are a writer, you are a politician, and we know what happens to politicians."

Now the Haitian literary canon has embraced English as well as French and Kreyol. Danticat's latest project compiles Haitian-American voices in an anthology of essays and poetry. *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, to be published early next year by Soho Press. "I am a reader more than a writer, and I wanted to read more Haitian stories," she says. "The first person I approached was my friend Dany Laferrière. I said 'Dany, could you please write me something about being Haitian in the United States.' He wrote me back and said, 'Darling. I don't write on command.' He's one of those people that you can love even more, even after he says something like that to you."

"So I decided to compile the published writing by Haitian-Americans that I already had and then seek new writers, new voices, some of them people who aren't writers at all but have great stories to tell. I wanted a woman I admire a lot, Sabine Albert, a true activist who was part of the Korean shop boycott in my neighborhood. I remembered being in college and going by there with my mother and seeing this woman not much older than me stand in there in the rain, in the sunshine protesting the prejudicial practices of this store. I asked her to write me something, but that didn't work out."

In the end Laferrière came through after all, with a story about a ten-year-old boy and his beloved grandmother in the town of Petit-Goâve. Francie Latour explores feelings of alienation. Babette Wainwright talks about the do-gooders who go to Haiti, often helping themselves more than the country. Patricia Benoit tells of a woman who needs a red dress to maintain her dignity while she is detained in a refugee center. And there is an essay by Jean-Robert Cadet about being a *restavek*.

"There are a lot of great stories in there . . . and a lot of good writing. We have college professors, filmmakers, journalists, social workers, and writers too. We also have people from all different walks of life, rich Haitians, poor Haitians," Danticat says.

Nurturing new voices falls in line nicely with Danticat's other work: as a teacher. While working on her master's at Brown, she taught an undergraduate course. She gave a graduate seminar at New York University. Each summer, she travels to Haiti with a group of students from Boston University. Last January she moved to Miami for a visiting professor post at the University of Miami, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate writing seminars. "I just met a young man here who I think will be one of our big names sometime soon. He's a student here and is just doing his thing, just writing. He has no big ego. So if I can help him and others like him in any way, that would make the teaching worthwhile."

Danticat is ushering her compatriots into the world of some of the most exciting contemporary American writing done by immigrants, influenced by the sounds and feelings of two worlds. "We have Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, people whose English is very much inspired by the other culture from which they or their parents came from," Danticat says.

"We know that we are too diluted by now to write convincingly in our mother tongue, but use the adopted language in writing the same way we are now using it to speak together. Go on any high school or college campus and you will hear the Haitian and Haitian-American kids speaking a mixture of English and Kreyol—Krenglish—that's what I do in my work. I am writing primarily for those kids, people like my brothers, who speak Kreyol, but can't read and write it and can't read and write French either," says Danticat. Her own sentences, both spoken and written, are laced with the Kreyol language: the words themselves and the way the words fall. "My editor is always saying, 'That's Kreyol!' when she reads some of my English sentences."

In explaining the power of the new immigrant writing, Danticat inadvertently comes up with a description that serves for her own work as well. "What makes the newly arrived immigrant writing so strong is that it embodies the immediate meeting of two worlds. It is full of grief in some cases, grief for a very recent loss of a homeland. It is full of anger sometimes, full of laughter too. But the emotions are still very raw, very strong. The wounds are still deep. The jokes are still remembered in their entirety. The memories are still not too fragmented, so that makes for strong writing."

Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo (essay date 2000)

SOURCE: N'Zengou-Tayo, Marie-José. "Rewriting Folklore: Traditional Beliefs and Popular Culture in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*" *MaComère* 3 (2000): 123-40.

[In the following essay, N'Zengou-Tayo analyzes the ways in which Danticat draws on folklore, Haitian tradition, and popular culture in her writing.]

In the last pages of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat, through Sophie Caco, gives us a hint about the part played by Haitian popular culture in her creative imagination: "Listening to the song, I realized that it was neither my mother nor Tante Atie who had given all the mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told and all the songs they sang. It was something that was essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land" (230).

More recently, in an article written for the newsletter of the Association for Haitian-American Development, Danticat confirms implicitly this as she recalls growing up with her grandmother who used to tell her “mystical folk tales.” Joël Des Rosiers, a Haitian-Canadian poet and essayist, draws the attention on the fact that Edwidge Danticat placed her short story collection under the umbrella of a Haitian traditional form (the folk tale), “Krik? Krak!” He read this use, and particularly the final story “**Women Like Us**,” [“**Epilogue: Women Like Us**”] as the will to bridge symbolically the gap between Haitian oral and written culture (160).

This paper will examine how Danticat makes the most of traditional beliefs and stories in her work. It will also discuss material that could “pass” for Haitian but the origin of which we cannot verify. This second point is based on the assumption that the U.S./non-Haitian reader will consider as belonging to Haitian traditional culture any element that does not relate to US or European culture. Taking into account the wide body of Haitian popular culture, how do we identify what Danticat has borrowed as such? What has she transformed for the fiction? Finally, what has her imagination totally made up? We raise these questions against the background of Karen McCarthy-Brown’s findings concerning the adaptation of Vodou in New York, and Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvains’s analysis of some “modern” Haitian folktales in 1937 because the main characteristic of a lively culture is to evolve constantly to adjust to the various changes taking place in the society (recent versions of folktales recorded by Deita, 1989). We acknowledge therefore the fact that, even as Haitian, we cannot decide with certainty what in Danticat’s fiction is “authentic” and what is “imaginary.” We have selected some elements of Haitian popular culture that are documented or well known. We will analyze their representation in her stories.

NAMES, NAMING AND LINEAGE

In *So Spoke the Uncle*, Jean Price-Mars drew attention to the importance of names and naming in Haitian popular culture. Using Levy-Bruhl’s analysis of the Primitive mentality, he confirmed the significance of the name for Haitians peasants and urban working class (41). Since then, anthropologists have described how names were given to children at birth. They have shown how sometimes first names were forged from surnames by declension and also how names were determined by circumstances surrounding the child’s birth (Bastien 74-75).

Danticat explores the various possibilities of naming in her short stories and her first novel. At the beginning of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, she lists the name of the children, mixing French and Creole names, translated and untranslated (6). This enumeration illustrates the

complexity of naming in Haitian culture as some names are obviously “pwent” names,¹ like “Small Misery,” “No Misery,” etc. In “**Caroline’s Wedding**,” a short sequence is very enlightening about the importance of names for Haitians. Grace and her mother are arguing about which guests to invite to Caroline’s wedding shower. The mother refuses to invite her Haitian friends because she would be “ashamed . . . to have her tongue trip, being unable to pronounce [the name of her daughter’s fiancé]” (186). She strongly objects to any of her daughter’s arguments as, for her, “the way [she] say[s] his name is not how it is meant to be said.” The issue of the name and its right pronunciation becomes the ground for rejecting Caroline’s [non-Haitian] fiancé even if the name “could pass” for a Haitian name (Eric Abrahams). In “**Children of the Sea**,” the baby born on the boat is named “Swiss” because her umbilical cord was cut with a Swiss army knife. Similarly, the young girl’s name in “**The Missing Peace**” is “Lamort” (Death) because her mother died while giving birth to her.² In “**Nineteen Thirty-Seven**,” the narrator’s mother makes the link between the birth of her child and the death of her mother as if her daughter had replaced the latter who died while trying to escape the slaughter of the Haitian sugar cane workers ordered by Trujillo (41). This connection recalls the African belief in the endless cycle of life and death, a belief retained in Haitian culture. One of the protagonists in “**The Missing Peace**” establishes the link between the two by saying that “Lamort” should have been named after her mother. Effectively, at the end of the story, the young girl walks boldly toward her grandmother to claim her mother’s name (109), an act implicitly presented as the sign of her coming of age. The granddaughter has to challenge her grandmother’s authority through the “pwent” (taunting) in the final dialogue (122).

Some names are associated with cultural traditions. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the grandmother’s name Man Ifé could be read as “[l]i fait” (she does). Nevertheless, it also reminds one of “Ifé” the sacred city where African slaves would return after their death and where Vodou Priests have to go for a mystical pilgrimage to “take the ason” (Apollon 139, 142-143). Man Ifé is the one who tells about traditional practices concerning women. In the names of the women of the family, the alliteration in “i” (Ifé, Atie, Martine, Sophie and Brigitte) phonetically binds the four generations. The “i” is doubled in Brigitte’s name so as to mark the special inheritance of her lineage. Looking at her, grandmother Ifé notes all the “faces in this child” (173). The family name, “Caco,” is inherited from the husband but re-appropriated by the women. The story beyond the name gives an insight into Danticat’s rewriting of Haitian tradition. In Haiti, “caco” is the name of a tiny red ant whose bite burns terribly. Through analogy, people gave the name to nineteenth-century peasant soldiers who defeated successive Haitian governments.