

LITERARY MEDITATIONS

BY DR. BRENDA M. GREENE

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

NOVELIST, MEMORIST, ESSAYIST, & SHORT STORY WRITER



Greetings Friends and Colleagues,

*Welcome to the sixth edition of **Literary Meditations**, a newsletter reflecting my conversations with writers on their work and writing life. **Literary Meditations** provides a preview of my book project which contextualizes the interviews that I have conducted with Black writers throughout the African diaspora on the radio show and podcast **Writers on Writing**. In this issue, I feature Edwidge Danticat, the award-winning novelist, memoirist, and essayist whose literary work presents readers with personal and compassionate stories on social justice, family, grief, politics, identity, and the role of the writer and artist through the lens of an immigrant Haitian American writer.*

About Edwidge Danticat

“Create dangerously for people who read dangerously.

This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer”(10).

Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously*

Edwidge Danticat is the award-winning author of 18 books, including "*Krik? Krak!*," a National Book Award finalist, "*The Farming of Bones*," an American Book Award winner; *Brother I Am Dying*, a National Book Circle Awards winner, *The Dew Breaker*, *Claire of the Sea Light*, "*The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*," and *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. Danticat was awarded the NBWC Toni Morrison Award at the 13th National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College, CUNY. She is a 2009 MacArthur Fellow and the Wun Tsun Tam Mellon Professor of the Humanities in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Columbia University.

I first met Edwidge Danticat when I was manager of the former Nkiru Books, the oldest Black bookstore in Brooklyn which was purchased by hip hop artists Talib Kweli and Yasiin Bey (aka Mos Def) in 1998. Edwidge was a regular visitor to Nkiru. I remember this modest young soft-spoken writer whose book *Breath, Eyes, and Memory* had just been named as a selection for Oprah’s Book Club. Edwidge was not even 30 years old. When she visited the store, we would talk about the situation in Haiti, her favorite books, and the need for Nkiru Books. She believed in supporting this independent Black bookstore, and she was a fan of Talib Kweli and Mos Def.

Fast forward to March, 2020. COVID. We are in the midst of a public pandemic, quarantined in our homes, and facing anxiety, depression, fear, and a loss of control. As Executive Director of the Center for Black Literature (CBL), I feel compelled to find a way for the CBL community to act in response to this catastrophe. I understand that in grappling with ways to cope with this pandemic, we must engage in acts that will feed us spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. Books have always offered us ways to make sense of the world and to explore that which frightens, excites, and comforts us. A light turns on! CBL will begin a book club.

Edwidge Danticat's collection of essays in *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* immediately comes to mind as the book with which to begin. We begin the book club in April 2020. Dozens of people call in from all over the country: New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Florida, Iowa, Texas, and Massachusetts, and Edwidge Danticat joins us for the discussion.

Edwidge is passionate about her writing and much of my interview with her focuses on the autobiographical nature of her writing and on her view of writing as a political and social act. I draw from the essays in *Create Dangerously* to highlight Edwidge's view of the role of an artist for a country in crisis. Edwidge's stories are personal and provide a space for us to understand and empathize with those who risk their lives despite the obstacles and horror that they face.

Greene

Do you think all writing is autobiographical, and how has that affected your work?

Danticat

We all have one tool to work with as artists, drawing from a general well of things that exist in the world, but that's processed through the personal. Before we're able to write

about things for others, it's a process of internalization of how we see the world that inevitably comes out in the writing. All writing is personal and all writing is political because we view things through our own eyes and prisms. Even in fiction that isn't directly autobiographical, like my first novel that many thought was my autobiography, I can see parallels and connections to my life. First novels are often emotionally autobiographical because you don't have any other model to draw from.

In her essay, "I Am Not a Journalist," Edwidge reflects on her admiration and friendship with Jean Dominique, a famous radio commentator and journalist who is assassinated.

Dominique is passionate about reporting on the political situation in Haiti and its impact on the people. He also hosts Haitian and international films and views them as "a seventh art" for conveying the political, social, and economic problems facing Haitian people. In his view, film is an important medium for those who cannot not read. As a journalist, he vows to get closer to the mood of the streets and wants to "smell the air and test the waters." Edwidge's telling of Dominique's story is both a personal reflection of someone whom she admires and a political statement on what journalists face in Haiti.

I began writing this essay . . . the morning that one of Haiti's most famous journalists, the radio commentator Jean Dominique, was assassinated. . . We had all come to think of him as heroically invincible. After all, he had survived the Duvalier dictatorship, during which his older brother Phillippe had been murdered while participating in yet another failed invasion attempt to topple Francois Duvalier. . . . Unlike his brother, Jean had survived several arrests and their resulting exiles, and had lived to return to Haiti to open and reopen his radio station, where being the owner and director allowed him a kind of autonomy that

few hired journalists could manage in a volatile political climate. Jean had expressed his opinions freely, seemingly without fear, criticizing groups as well as individuals, organizations, and institutions who'd proven themselves to be inhumane, unethical, or simply unjust. (Danticat 41, 42)

Greene

What are your thoughts on the importance of history, memory, and writing as a political and social act?

Danticat

I never begin thinking I'm writing a political story. I aim to write something that engages people. My model for writing is storytelling, where there's an attempt to captivate an audience while embedding lessons that may be overt or hidden. I like to do different kinds of writing because I don't want to preach, though I can do that more in my non-fiction.

In the chapter "I Speak" Edwidge, who is part of a team that is doing a documentary on torture victims in Haiti, recounts the experiences of a woman who has been tortured.. The courage of the victim, Alèrte Béance is undaunting. Alèrte narrates her torture.

They sliced me into pieces with machete strokes. They cut out my tongue and my mouth: my gums, plates, teeth, and jaw on my right side. They cut my face open, my temple and cheek totally open. They cut my eye open. They cut my body, my whole shoulder and neck and back slashed with machete blows. (Danticat 75)

Alèrte's children do not recognize her as she slowly heals; however, she does not let this silence her and is determined to tell her story. She tells the team that the doctors were able to sew her tongue back together again and continues: 'It healed,' . . . so I can tell my story, so

people can know what happened to me. Her strength and resolve seem to grown with each word.” (Danticat 81)

Create Dangerously is particularly relevant as we face and witness attacks on journalists, the banning of books, the censorship of speech, continual attempts to erode our democracy, and the deportation, torture, and inhumane treatment of immigrants who have legally entered this country.

These literary meditations on the reflections of Edwidge Danticat and her work represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at www.drbrendamgreene.com.

About Writers on Writing

Writers on Writers is a radio show that I began creating and producing at Medgar Evers College in 2003. The show airs on the first and third Sunday over the airwaves of WNYE, 91.5 FM and can be viewed on the Center for Black Literature YouTube page. [\(122\) Center for Black Literature Medgar Evers College - YouTube](#).

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