

Book Review

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Book Review

Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

To create today is to create dangerously. Any publication is an act, and that act exposes one to the passions of an age that forgives nothing...The question, for all those who cannot live without art and what it signifies, is merely to find out how, among the police forces of so many ideologies..., the strange liberty of creation is possible.

-Albert Camus¹

In the eponymously named first chapter, "Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work," a description of the 1964 execution of the freedom fighters, Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, in Port-au-Prince, a spectacle noteworthy for its unabashed intention to subdue and instruct through public terror, is one, which, initially, does not betray any authorial voice. A documentary tone remains in place until the appearance of time, or the uncertainty of its movement, forces the author's voice to enter the narrative: "Time is slightly compressed on the copy of the film I have and in some places the images skip. There is no sound...Some time elapses, it seems..." (3).² This moment compels the author to work for understanding rather than for an evaluative enunciation. It is a confession of a lapse in knowledge while she is viewing the footage: "Off screen someone probably shouts, 'Fire!' and they do" (4). Here, the author, Edwidge Danticat, is most unsure of the events: the 'probably' of that statement reminds us that her copy of the video recording also hovers at the 'perhaps' of abridged perspective, one which cannot access the same terror which the captive audience of Papa Doc Duvalier experienced outside the national cemetery on that day, five years before Danticat's birth in 1969.

In *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat demonstrates her remarkable ability to work syncretically in order to bring together what may initially appear to be unrelated histories, ideas and thinkers as source materials for her own textual commitments. She interviews, observes and interprets and then accompanies her subjects on their journeys even as she commits their stories to paper. This method of narrative inquiry demonstrates a steady interdisciplinary preoccupation with rendering human experience meaningful through the textual

commemoration of the suffering, victimization and losses endured by an international, cross-cultural and linguistically plural community.

Danticat's fiction and non-fiction are indelibly tied to each other. The compression of time - on the video and in lived life - and Danticat's considerable talents as a novelist and now essayist engenders a study whose content ranges from autobiographical notes on individual, family and social memory to politically engaged reflections on Hurricane Katrina and the January 2010 earthquake that struck Haiti. Danticat's portraits are case studies, explorations of the civic world, historic inquiry, political surveys, life stories and autobiographical reflections. She brings together and organizes the "exiles, émigrés, refugees, migrants, nomads, immigrants, naturalized citizens, half-generation, first-generation, American, Haitian, Haitian American, men, women, and children who were living in the United States and elsewhere," that is, the *dyaspora*, those who have their feet planted in both worlds (51).³ *Dyaspora* is a neologism from the Creole meant to underscore the double-ness of immigrant life and consciousness in contrast to atavistic tendencies in conventional diasporic theory.⁴ With this collection, Danticat, known primarily as a writer of fiction⁵ - with forays into children's literature and travel writing (and most recently, memoir⁶) - moves into the essay form while retaining the features of the fiction that made her famous in the literary world.⁷ Thus, the title and subject matter of this new work is a continuation and extension of her role as an analytical writer. It demonstrates a compulsion for narrative witnessing for the sake of the victims of history.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to assess Danticat's *Create Dangerously* without gathering to oneself a series of disparate texts, authors, historical eras, political moments and small acts of memory for a text whose commitment to the intertextual is written into its title, its epigraph and its individual chapters - all named with astonishing purpose. To read Edwidge Danticat's latest work of non-fiction is to revisit, even if briefly, *The Dew Breaker*,⁸ where the Haitian-American author invokes the Soviet poet, Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938)⁹, in the epigraph. Mandelstam, a victim of Stalin's regime, provided the lyrical and intertextual frame that opens that novel - urgent lines excerpted - elliptically - from his untitled poem written in 1937 while in exile in Voronež:

Maybe this is the beginning of madness...
 Forgive me for what I am saying.
 Read it...quietly, quietly.

The stories in *The Dew Breaker* create and extend the Haitian *dyaspora* through the interweaving of story, memory and history as well as in its treatment of the experience of trauma and the repetition of trauma; exile and displacement; language and story-telling and the dream-world; violence: state sanctioned in Haiti and police violence in New York; immigrant

identities and rights; coping strategies and assimilation; and, finally, guilt and absolution. The narratives of Danticat's characters hover at the limits of a lethal intertextuality in which Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier, Tonton Macoutes, Abner Louima and Patrick Dorismond represent only a small portion of the historical sensibility that runs through this cycle of short interconnected tales. She layers experiences – those of the victim and the perpetuator – in both that novel and in this new collection of essays. The dual nature of listening and telling in these stories is directed at the memorialization of a diasporic consciousness in which a kind of madness – that of the experience and its memory – compels a transformation into story – which, as Mandelstam knew, was obligated to the telling as well as to the listening.

The signposts direct our attention to the gaps as well as to the points of intersection that inform and form intellectual communities. These leitmotifs create a responsibility to which Danticat's chapters commit. "Walk Straight," details Danticat's 1999 visit to Haiti "...to revisit these mountains from which [our] family has sprung and which have released [us] to different types of migrations" (22). Danticat reflects on the stories of her family which she only knows as fragments, "indefinite segments" (23); she understands herself in the context of a family which is no longer there – the daughter of, the cousin to, the niece of; she introduces herself to these distant relatives as "Mira's daughter, Edwidge" (25). Here, migration, the loss of home, the difficulty of naming and flight are knotted to the essay, "Flying Home," a reflection on the events of September 11, 2001, where Morrison's *Song of Solomon*,¹⁰ Ellison's short story, "Flying Home"¹¹ and the Greek myth of Daedulus and Icarus are summoned to bring the destruction of the towers into conversation with earlier texts which work through the necessity of taking to the air, even if arrival is not assured. Danticat's citation of the poet, Assotto Saint, weaves this connection even more tightly: "i wanted to write a happy carefree poem/ for my childhood/ lost too fast.../ somewhere in the air/ between port-au-prince & new york city/ but I'm left bereft." (116-117). These chapters of walking and flying expand relationality and the ties that bind, an appealing method for exploring the necessity of a hybridity when communicating one's self to the world.

The chapters in this collection are the knots on an unending rope which mark intervals in time and space – from the Haitian-Swiss artist, Pascale Monnin,¹² whose cover art on *Create Dangerously* depicts the victims of the 2010 earthquake in pen and ink to "Welcoming Ghosts," where Danticat works through the art and practice of both the Haitian-American artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat and the artist and filmmaker, Maya Deren. The chapter, "Bicentennial," contemplates the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Haiti in comparison with the American and French Revolutions which created those Republics. The crippling of Haiti – politically and economically – and the failures and achievements of the new republic are

examined in light of Thomas Jefferson and Toussaint L'Ouverture, both of whom battled for freedom and refused to surrender in their own revolutionary struggles (even though Jefferson neither supported the Haitian uprising nor acknowledged the new republic) (97-105).

Danticat's impetus for the historical and the political are fundamental components of her identity as a writer, an impulse which is both duty and desire - to excavate and illuminate those stories which have never been or could never be told - with dignity. What emerges from *Create Dangerously* is a concretization of Danticat's diasporic philosophy, a composite of experiences, traditions, temporal spaces and geographic locations. It is a philosophy that is grounded in a plurality, a textual behavior that demonstrates an additive sensibility and a narrative practice that moves both centripetally and centrifugally. Danticat's writing refuses to take an absolute position on controversial issues which close down possibility for novel affiliations, abbreviate connections or neutralize nascent links. Her work gestures at and promotes social change, a slight shift or alteration of the status quo through its experimental narration of cultural perspectives and diasporic affiliations as a narrative posture. These chapters are complex reformulations of Mandelstam's lyrical plea, one that necessitates caution - a vigilant poetic care - to both tell and listen. The chapters are vivid stories that are bound up with Camus' directive to create dangerously. Danticat deploys multiplicity in order to portray what it might mean to be both here and there, inside and out, Haitian and American, journalist and reader, a revolutionary and a witness. "I am Not a Journalist" tells the story of the 2000 assassination of Haiti's most famous and politically engaged radio commentator, Jean Dominique. Danticat chronicles the history of clandestine subversion in the 1960s under Duvalier through stories of Dominique and his work in film and theater. As founder of the "cinema club," Dominique screened international films including Resnais' documentary on the concentration camps, *Night and Fog*. Linking the horrors of the death camp to that of Duvalier's torture prison, Dominique once said, "To us, Auschwitz was Fort Dimanche" (43). An interesting moment in this chapter concerns the idea of certainty and national belonging. Danticat recalls a conversation she had with Dominique in New York:

I had told him that I envied the certainty with which he could and often did say the words, "My country." "My country is suffering," he would say. "It's being held captive by the criminals. My country is slowly dying, melting away."

"My country, Jean," I said, "is one of uncertainty. When I say 'my country' to some Haitians, they think I mean the United States. When I say 'my country' to some Americans, they think of Haiti." (49)

Danticat elegantly and with apparent effortlessness, reflects on the intimate link between history and politics, art and artists, and memory and storytelling. Positioned within her own experience of *dyaspora*, Danticat's essays continue to work through her craft as an historical undertaking:

I'm not a historian but I'm fascinated by history and especially the way that it manifests itself in the present. That's always something I'm looking at and I think especially in the case of Haitian history.... So the way in which history is not just something in the past, but the way that people carry it forward, the way they live in it, the way they claim it, is very interesting to me. So I'm also interested in the gaps in history. The silences of history and even those ordinary moments during daily life, how people lived through that, interest me very much.¹³

Danticat's method – grounded in reading, listening, overhearing and imagining – provides a layered approach that is responsive to both formal and informal forms of communication: conversations and interviews; radio and theater; translations and adaptations; memoir and dream; eyewitness accounts and photography; newspapers and journals; and novels and history books. From these sources, Danticat artfully and with great commitment, writes so that Mandelstam's lines of verse in *The Dew Breaker* may touch her epigraph for *Create Dangerously* – an excerpt from Maya Deren's (1917-1961) *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), a monograph about religious possession in Haiti Vodoun:

This is the fiction of beginnings, couched in the past tense.
But the chants are not *in memoriam*. They may be heard as
a celebration of each contemporary recapitulation of that
first creation.

As an immigrant and an artist, Danticat finds herself in an ideological “floating homeland” where, as Camus said in Uppsala in 1957, “the strange liberty of creation is possible.” While her literary scholarship is not a call to direct action, Danticat's work provides a platform to voice forms of resistance practiced in the Haitian dyaspora and cultivate a new movement of diasporic protest, resistance and dissent. Examples of which circulate in the chapters of *Create Dangerously*: audio and video recordings, film and staged performances, poetry and the visual arts – all of which keep stories of repressive power in the sight of the global community. Thus, Danticat uses Camus in order to write the dramas of those who are locked out of political and public discursive geographies:

Each story comes differently, but I feel like everything –
the past, the present, what I'm doing now – is fertile, is a
seed that eventually gets planted when I've read the paper

or heard something in a conversation, and then you find they reoccur later on.¹⁴

In a recent forum in *Small Axe*, J. Michael Dash, Elizabeth Duchanaud and Martin Munro raise a number of critical questions in light of this collection to which Danticat responds with her own essay, "Onè, Respè."¹⁵ Indeed, in the same forum, Dash wrote that, "'Creating dangerously' can mean practicing a new ungrounded poetics for Haitian writing in which national and ethnic difference gives way to a collective, borderless identity that is increasingly hybrid and unstable."¹⁶ Citing Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* in order to think about Danticat's work, Dash writes that such a poetics offers a vision of identity that is both grounded yet borderless, that "permits each individual to be here and elsewhere, rooted and open."¹⁷ At this moment in Dash's assessment, Danticat's use of Camus' directive re-contextualizes his 1957 speech and links it to Glissant's Caribbean poetics of convergences:

Each time I return to the Americas, whether to an island like Martinique, which is where I was born, or to the American continent, I am struck by the openness of this landscape. I say it is an "irrupted" landscape—it's a word that I coined obviously —, in it is irruption and rush, and eruption as well, perhaps a lot of the real and the unreal.¹⁸

Danticat's aesthetic expression remains rooted in a committed art, which explores the complexity of her subject matter shaped through a dialogue with the materials of social and cultural territories, those materials that are 'irrupted.' In closing, if we return to the fiction of beginnings, the cultural field of Danticat's work is the recollection of a haunting, a tragic catalog of loss. As a writer of social change, Danticat calls into being those who have also worked for social change – at both the local and global level, privately in journals and publicly on the radio. Danticat's writings – fiction and non-fiction – are emblematic of Camus' call for a functional and responsible art – which is not merely decorative but can also activate resistance. Danticat's use of Camus creates an intellectual frame of reference that links the two in a convivial space which establishes both political discourse and political behavior through an engagement with poetry, novels, songs, painting, dance, film and theatre. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat reveals a range of artistic voices – those who might not be recognized as such – in order to make a deliberate and lapidary intervention into her own artistic practice, the role of art and the artistic endeavor and Camus' "Create Dangerously" speech:

Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope...I

believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. (272)

For Danticat, those millions of solitary voices are those which she brings to the forefront in her work. Even through Camus' own ambiguity about the artist's new responsibility in "Create Dangerously," he is clear that a midway point between autonomy and authenticity of art must be maintained.¹⁹ The artist, as Danticat demonstrates in her works, cannot turn away from her time but neither can she lose herself in it. Time and passion are built into creating dangerously. Danticat achieves this through a political, social and artistic engagement with the world – both brutal and sweet – and with those who struggle similarly.

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¹ Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O' Brien (New York: Knopf, 1961), 251. Originally delivered on December 14, 1957 at the University of Uppsala in Sweden.

² Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); hereafter cited in text.

³ Nancy Raquel Mirabal and Edwidge Danticat, "Dyasporic Appetites and Longings: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat," *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 26-39.

⁴ In the same interview, Danticat goes on to explain what she understands by the term *dyaspora* in detail: "There's definitely a larger, global Diaspora, what we call the Dyaspora, the people of the Diaspora. It's also very layered because it encompasses many generations, many decades now of migrations and different varying levels of assimilation and return to the community. So actually, there is a saying that Haiti has nine geographical departments and it's said that the Haitian Diaspora, outside of Haiti, is called the tenth department" (Ibid, 29).

⁵ Danticat's other works of fiction include: *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), *Krik? Krak!* (1996), *The Farming of Bones* (1998), and *The Dew Breaker* (2004).

⁶ See Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), a memoir, in which Danticat treated the deaths of her father and uncle and the birth of her daughter, Mira.

⁷ In 2009, Danticat was awarded a MacArthur Genius grant.

⁸ Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

⁹ The poet, Osip Mandelstam, was born in Warsaw to a wealthy Jewish family and raised in St. Petersburg. Unpopular with the Soviet authorities, Mandelstam found it increasingly difficult to publish his poetry although several volumes of his work were published in the 1920s. In 1934, after reading an epigram denouncing Stalin to friends in "The Stalin Epigram," later known as the "The sixteen-line death sentence," Mandelstam was arrested and exiled. He survived that exile only to perish in a transit camp in 1938.

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1977).

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home: and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

¹² On her work, Monnin states, "The people that populate my paintings come from my own personal mythology."

http://elevenelevenjournal.com/Arts/Pascale_Monnin.html

¹³ Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "Diasporic Appetites and Longings: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat," *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (2007): 35.

¹⁴ Mirabal, "Diasporic Appetites and Longings," 34-35.

¹⁵ Edwidge Danticat, "Onè, Respè," *sx salon* 4 (April 2011).

<http://smallaxe.net/wordpress3/discussions/2011/04/30/one-respe/>

¹⁶ J. Michael Dash, "The Pregnant Widow: Negating Frontiers in Danticat's *Create Dangerously*," *sx salon* 4, (April 2011).

<http://smallaxe.net/wordpress3/discussions/2011/04/30/the-pregnant-widow>

¹⁷ Dash, “The Pregnant Widow.”

¹⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à Une Poétique Du Divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); cited in Dash.

¹⁹ “If it [the artist] adapts itself to what the majority of our society wants, art will be a meaningless recreation. If it blindly rejects that society, if the artist makes up his mind to take refuge in his dream, art will express nothing but a negation” (Camus 253).