

## Faculty Responses to *Brother I'm Dying* by Edwidge Danticat

### Pauline Bullen

Assistant Professor, SEEK



Portrait of Professor Bullen by Sandra Brewster

My introduction to Haiti was as one of a very small minority of Black students studying at the university of Toronto, Canada, in a newly established African Literature course in 1978. What a sense of empowerment for a young Black girl born in the Caribbean but growing up in an extremely alienating, predominantly white community, where the specter of slavery and the myth of African inferiority colored her everyday experiences, to read about the Haitian revolt against white supremacy that resulted in its independence! Consequently, as I read Edwidge Danticat's "Brother I'm Dying" I heard more than simply a Black immigrant, 'alien' or 'outsider', crying out in grief at his imminent death. Instead, I heard the cries of the Haitian people against the colonial rape, plunder and occupation of their land. I heard a mourning wail of grief, as the author asks us to show our humanity and understanding at the stories of her birthplace and the sanctioned reduction, after independence, of the Haitian people's economic, social and cultural reality. There is profound grief in Danticat's writing even as she paints a beautiful picture of Black family, community, love, loyalty, pride and dignity. Even as they are increasingly displaced, amongst the people of Haiti, there is new life and new hope.

### Robert Cherry

Professor, Economics



#### ***Family Tales in the Service of a Political Agenda***

*Brother, I'm Dying* has little about the daily life of Haitians; their jobs, social and cultural institutions. Instead, Danticat focuses on violent episodes in Haitian history: Trujillo's killings on the Dominican border; U.S. occupation, Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes repression, and Haitian riot policy behavior. Rather than providing the reader with detailed information, Danticat chooses to promote emotional outrage by presenting tales of family members that accompany each of the episodes.

How true are the tales she has been told? How much has she embellished these accounts? What we do know is that telling these tales as *first-person* accounts make them seem factual and puts faces and lives onto important episodes in Haitian history. In particular, *Brother, I Am Dying* uses Danticat's family's tales to invest its reader with emotional outrage at U.S. Haitian policy.

For me, this became clear when she placed Joseph's childhood tale after this chilling account of his death. Danticat writes, "Fearing that he might be captured by the Americans to work in the labor camps ... Granpe Nozial ordered him to never go down the mountain." Family illness, however, forced Joseph to seek medicine in town where he sees "white men ...kicking the thing on the ground as though it was a soccer ball to one and other with the round tips of their boots. Taking small steps to stand the same distance away as other bystanders, my uncle finally saw what it was: a man's head." Thus, **from the beginning of his life until its end, Joseph experienced first hand the inhumanity of U.S. policies towards Haitians.**

While I sympathize with her pain, and even sympathize with her political agenda, it does not negate my concerns. Absence its political agenda, the book offers little to inform us about the Haitian experience. *Brother, I'm Dying* should be supplemented by panel discussions of the important issues it raises: U.S. Haitian policy, Immigration Detention Centers, and the issues children face when they are reunited with their parents in the U.S. when they are teenagers.

## Beth Evans

Associate Professor, Library



Edwidge Danticat tells the story of her family where the borders of belonging are easily blurred and loosely defined. In contrast, political borders are harshly drawn and in the end become impenetrable. These lines appear to exist to challenge and eventually thwart the ability of a family to stay united. Danticat weaves the personal into her description of major, often wrenching, historical events, and has the remarkable ability to observe, at times, in an objective and clinical manner. *Brother, I'm Dying* is engrossing personal tale of dedicated, noble and loving individuals. Set in Bel Air, Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Brooklyn, New York, the book is sure to resonate with many Brooklyn College students.

## Namulundah Florence

Assistant Professor, School of Education



Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*, resonates with recent and assimilated immigrants who may feel unsure of their identities as they navigate two cultures, balance more than one country's political system, raise children without being overwhelmed by the tensions of various loyalties, support families across oceans, and frequently code switch linguistic speech. The feeling of alienation is as familiar as a greeting from next door neighbors! Yet, survival is always the solution, never an option. In the midst of the angst generated by loved ones and acquaintances, immigrants create spaces of hope for themselves.

And the experiences we share? There are the ubiquitous pre-paid phone cards promising 20 minutes but disconnecting the line unceremoniously after 10 minutes or less. Credit runs out on phone cards before you communicate your intentions because everybody in the compound has something to tell you. Medicines? American doctors are trained, but local herbalists command ancestral loyalties. Airports? What if officials discover the potato cake I stashed in the carry-on or detain me for unimaginable reasons? Meanwhile, rents are paid, students go to school, adults go to work and it still snows in New York. Danticat's book reminds every immigrant that her/his experience is not unique. Therein lies its relevance!

## Helen Georgas

Assistant Professor, Library



Danticat's story makes me think of so many things: my own parents' immigration from Greece to Canada in the late sixties, my deep and shameful ignorance of Haiti's history, the direct line that connects the impersonal elements of immigration policy to the profoundly real, specific and personal effects it has on individuals and those with whom they are connected—friends,

family, classmates, neighbors. *Brother, I'm Dying* made me feel many things, too: sad that people give up so much when they leave their homeland for a better life, outraged by the treatment that Danticat's uncle and other Haitian asylum seekers in the U.S. receive, troubled by the political uncertainty and violence that the people in this story endure, awed by the spirit of Danticat's family, and lucky—so very lucky—to be living in the diverse and amazing world that is Brooklyn.

## David Grubbs

Associate Professor, Conservatory of Music



*Brother, I'm Dying* is Edwidge Danticat's deeply affecting memoir of her father and her Uncle Joseph—the two fathers in her life. Uncle Joseph was a minister in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and Danticat was raised as a member of her Uncle Joseph's and Tante Denise's family from the age of two until her emigration to Brooklyn at age twelve, when she and her brother rejoined their mother and father and two younger siblings.

*Brother, I'm Dying* comes to us as readers because, as Danticat explains, "I am writing this only because they can't." The book begins with the deaths of her father and uncle looming in the near future—and at precisely the same moment that Danticat discovers that she is pregnant with her first child.

I was especially moved by Danticat's comments about the limitations of what can be said even around those with whom you are closest. Of her relationship with her dying father, she writes, "We have always been equally paralyzed by the fear of breaking each other's heart." With this poignant observation, Danticat expresses a sentiment that I imagine to be shared by many: that one wishes to be as close as close can be to the beloved figures in one's life, but that there are often mutually imposed, tacitly agreed-upon limits to what can be expressed.

I look forward to discussing the book's spare, beautifully modulated language, and its zig-zagging narrative structure. Once Danticat has introduced the book's two major figures as men approaching the ends of their lives, the narration skips forwards and backwards in time, and often unpredictably so. It is a storyteller's strategy that rivets the reader, but it also speaks to the impossible desire to master time and to alter the unalterable, one of literature's most persistent dreams.

## Victoria Nunez

Assistant Professor, School of Education



### *Sister, My Heart is Breaking*

I first read an excerpt from this book in a 2005 edition of the *New Yorker*. I was intrigued by the tender story of Danticat's cousin, Marie Micheline. An older sister figure for Danticat, Marie's difficult path into adulthood began with an unplanned pregnancy that was tragic but not heartbreaking. I was uncertain how that excerpt would fit in a broader book that, from the start, seemed to address the illness and death of Danticat's father. But the book is so much more than a recounting of her father's death, or even the passing of the older generation in her family who reared her in a community style. Part of Danticat's masterful style is that she layers so many stories into one book and the book stands as a cohesive whole. This is a memoir of raising children in the Haitian diaspora, it is a tribute to her Uncle Joseph and Tante Denise, the side of her family that chose to stay in Haiti. But it is also a book that follows the sad descent of Haiti into violence and chaos in the early twenty-first century. At times the tone is that of a sweet nostalgia for the past, at other points it is of suspense, and finally, it rests at a point of tragedy. Read from the perspective of 2010, after the devastating earthquake, it reminded me that the suffering and disorder which plague Haiti in the present is not a recent phenomenon.

The tragedies suffered by Danticat's family are personal, but they are not unique. I recommend this book to Brooklyn College's incoming freshman because it is beautifully written, and it will bother the conscience of Americans. The book did not get broader acclaim the year it was published, I believe, because it is fundamentally somber and it addresses a part of the world that is small and evokes little sympathy or interest (think Afghanistan pre-Obama and pre-Charlie Wilson's War). Indeed, my heart felt broken by the end of the book. But I'm ok if my heart is broken for a good reason.