Edwidge Danticat’s Writing is for Everyone

The One Book One College One Community Committee has chosen the theme of immigration for the 2017-2018 school year. The primary reason why we chose this theme is because many students, faculty members, and staff members are immigrants or related to immigrants, and are concerned about their safety and well-being in the current political climate.

Edwidge Danticat is a critically acclaimed Haitian-American author and activist. Danticat immigrated to America from Haiti when she was 12 years old. Breath Eyes Memory, her first novel, was published in 1994, and in 1998, was chosen as the Oprah’s Book Club pick. She has also won the American Book Award for The Farming of Bones (1998). Danticat has written 15 books in multiple genres—fiction, creative non-fiction essays, young adult fiction, short stories and children’s books.

As a Haitian-American author, Danticat’s work may resonate with the population in Brockton. Greater Boston is home to the third largest community of Haitians in the United States. Ever since the 2010 earthquake, Haiti has been prominent in the American news cycle. Currently, there are Haitians who are in America under Temporary Protected Status. This status may be withdrawn in January 2018. This climate makes Danticat’s visit to Massasoit Community College a significant one, as her work speaks about the very real challenges that Haitians face in Haiti, during the immigration process, and in America. Danticat also recognizes the beauty in Haiti and in Haitians, as well as their power.

Immigration is the prominent theme in Danticat’s work; however, within her ouevre there exist many themes. Please consider teaching or suggesting a children’s book or a short story for your students to read and think about.

We are honored to have her visit Massasoit on November 7 & 8, 2017.

This guide is meant to help you navigate her body of work. Please invite your students to the event, and please consider teaching Breath, Eyes, Memory, or one of her interviews, short stories, children’s books in your classes!

If you have any questions or need help brainstorming ways to incorporate her work into your class, please contact Dr. Daniel at rdaniel@massasoit.mass.edu.
Brief Guide to *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)

**Style:** This book is a novel broken into four parts. It is written in first person narration (I, me, my). It is a bildungsroman—a novel dealing with one person’s formative years.

**Primary Characters:** Sophie, Tante Atie, Martine, Grandmé Ifé

Sophie: is the protagonist and speaker during the novel.

Tante Atie: she is Sophie’s aunt and primary caretaker until Sophie immigrates to the U.S.

Martine: is Sophie’s mother

Grandmé Ifé is the matriarch of the family. Atie and Martine are her daughters, and Sophie is her granddaughter

Marc: is Martine’s boyfriend. He is Haitian-American.

Joseph: is Sophie’s husband. He is African American

**Setting:** The book moves between Haiti, Brooklyn, New York, and Providence, Rhode Island. It begins in the early 1980s.

**Summary:** Sophie immigrates from Haiti to Brooklyn when she is 12 years old, and reconnects with her mother, who left when she was a baby. Martine begins to “test” her after she discovers that Sophie has a relationship with Joseph, a much older African American jazz musician. The test was a physical examination to see if Sophie was still a virgin. Sophie eventually elopes with Joseph, and after she has a baby girl, goes back to Haiti to visit Tante Atie and Grandmé Ifé. That visit helps to heal her broken relationship with her mother.

**Things to consider:**

“Testing”: When the book was published, people thought that every Haitian woman underwent the practice of “testing”. In a later publication, Danticat includes an Afterword, written as a letter to Sophie, the main character. She writes, “...your mother’s ‘tests’ have taken on a larger meaning, and your body is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh....Of course, not all Haitian mothers are like your mother. Not all Haitian daughters are tested, as you have been” (Danticat 242).
**Political Context:** This book is set towards “the end of the 30-year Duvalier dictatorial dynasty in Haiti. The Tonton Macoutes, the Duvaliers’ henchmen, were still abusing their power, hurting and killing people for sport at times” (Danticat 257). It’s important to examine how the political context in Haiti impacts the women and the relationships that they have with each other and with the men in their lives.

**Possible Discussion Questions:**

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/breath-eyes-memory/guide

**Possible Companion Text:**

“The Danger of a Single Story”: this is a TED talk by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She argues that “[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” (20 minute video).

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
Here are a few other short stories, interviews, or articles that students can read:

**Immigration/Travel/Separation**

“All Immigrants are Artists”, *The Atlantic*—

This is an interview with Danticat about a book that she enjoys. That book argues that “all immigrants are artists”, and that recreating your life is a work of art.

**Idea:** I often use this to get students talking about their own immigration or migration narratives. It’s a way for them to think about the creative practices they already engage in on a regular basis.


A mother and daughter are separated because of the mother’s immigration status; the mother records stories for her daughter to listen to at night; the daughter writes a story that ‘rescues’ her mother.

**Idea:** This is a way for students to think about relationships they have with parents or other loved ones; or a moment where their art or a talent helped someone close to them.

*Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2010)—a book length collection of essays about writing and creating other forms of art as a form of dissent. Any of these essays can be adapted to discuss the importance of creativity, and the power of imagination.

*Krik/Krak* (1995) is a book of short stories. Any one of the stories from this collection could be taught; they are easy to read and offer rich opportunities for a discussion. Most of the stories can be read in 20-30 minutes.
“Children of the Sea” in Krik/Krak

Two teenagers who are in love are separated: one gets on a boat and heads to Florida; the other is prevented from leaving by her father. The story is written as a series of letters between the two teenagers.

**Idea:** could be used to talk about the physical dangers of immigration; times that we defied or attempted to defy orders; times our family members or loved ones protected us; the ethics around being a bystander to violence.

“Caroline's Wedding” in Krik/Krak

The story begins with the protagonist telling her mother that she is finally an American citizen. When she was much younger, her mother was detained by ICE, and given a shot while she was pregnant with her sister, Caroline. That shot is one of the reasons why Caroline was born without her left forearm. The story centers around Caroline's upcoming wedding, and the mother deals with the 'loss' of a daughter to marriage, while reflecting about her own experiences as a young bride.

**Idea:** this story is a way to discuss the treatment of pregnant women who are in prisons or detention centers; the impact that separation has on marriage; as well as the intersection between disability studies and studies on sexuality.

*Brother, I’m Dying* (2007)

A memoir about Danticat’s uncle, Joseph Dantica. He raised her until she was 12. He asked the Department of Homeland Security for temporary asylum; he was ill and began vomiting, but wasn’t given any treatment. He died the next day. [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/books/review/Rowt.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/books/review/Rowt.html)

*Behind the Mountains* (2002) (Young Adult Fiction)

Celiane is a 13 year old girl who writes in her journal about life in Haiti as well as her adjustment to New York.

**Idea:** this book could be used to teach students who are not yet reading at the college level about how young teenagers experience immigration.
Death/Loss

“Nineteen Thirty-Seven” in *Krik/Krak*

A daughter visits her mother in prison. The mother recounts her own history escaping from genocide in the Dominican Republic. Mentions U.S. occupation of Haiti.

“A Wall of Fire Rising” in *Krik/Krak*

A family deals with poverty in Haiti; the young son memorizes parts of a play that features Boukman, a leader in the slave revolt that began the Haitian revolution. The father becomes fixated on a hot air balloon.

*Claire of the Sea Light* (2013)—a 7 year old girl goes missing from Ville Rose, a small fishing village in Haiti.

Family (Mother/Daughter Relationships)—most of Danticat's work focuses on mother/daughter relationships. In the following stories, that theme is prominent.

*Mama’s Nightingale* (2015)—A mother and daughter are separated because of the mother’s immigration status; the mother records stories for her daughter to listen to at night; the daughter writes a story that ‘rescues’ her mother.

“Nineteen Thirty-Seven” in *Krik Krak*

A daughter visits her mother in prison. The mother recounts her own history escaping from genocide in the Dominican Republic. Mentions U.S. occupation of Haiti.

“Between the Pool and the Gardenias” in *Krik Krak*

The protagonist is a woman who is still mourning due to six miscarriages when she sees a baby who was “thrown out”. The baby is dead, but she takes care of it anyway and talks to her. When she attempts to bury the baby, the gardener accuses her of killing the baby and burying it on her boss’s property. The story ends as she is waiting for the police.

“The Missing Peace” in *Krik Krak*
An American woman comes to Haiti to find her mother in the chaos of a dictator’s regime. A little girl takes her to an open graveyard to look at the bodies of people who were killed during the revolution?. The girl’s mother died during childbirth. The two women

New York Day Women in *Krik Krak*

This widely anthologized short story is about a woman who sees her mother walking around New York City without her, doing things she never imagined her doing.

**Haitian History/Culture**

*The Farming of Bones* (1998)—American Book Award Winner—Anabelle Desir is a Haitian woman living and working in the Dominican Republic. Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo incites genocidal violence against Haitian workers, and she has to leave her home to go back to Haiti.

*After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (2002)—creative non fiction/memoir—this is written from Danticat’s perspective; she returns to Haiti during Carnival, a celebratory time, while also offering readers Haitian history and cultural context for the event.

*The Dew Breaker* (2004)—a series of interconnected stories about life in Haiti under the Duvalier dictatorship. The title refers to a nickname for torturers who were working under the Duvalier regime.

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