



**EDWIDGE DANTICAT**

**In Conversation with Paul Holdengräber**

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**LIVE from the New York Public Library**

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**Celeste Bartos Forum**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. I say this a hundred times. My goal here at the Library is simply to make the lions roar, to make a heavy institution levitate when I am successful. I will, though, not say very much tonight. I would rather put you immediately in the presence of Edwidge Danticat. I would like her to read, which is something we rarely do. I rarely ask writers to come and read. I usually interview them, or we have a conversation. But in this particular case I felt it would be powerful as well

as necessary for Edwidge Danticat to read, and she will herself contextualize what she is reading, and after that we'll have a conversation together. So here is Edwidge Danticat.

**(applause)**

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Good evening. I have both the great pleasure and the mild discomfort of reading about someone who is here tonight, so it will be interesting. But first I wanted to read a little bit from Camus, "Create Dangerously," the essay that inspired this book.

"It is said that Nietzsche after the break with Lou Salome, in a period of complete solitude, crushed and uplifted at the same time by the perspective of the huge work he had to carry on without any help, used to walk at night on the mountains overlooking the gulf of Genoa and light great bonfires of leaves and branches which he would watch as they burned. I have often dreamed of those fires and have occasionally imagined certain men and certain works in front of those fires, as a way of testing men and works. Well, our era is one of those fires whose unbearable heat will doubtless reduce many a work to ashes! But as for those which remain, their metal will be intact, and, looking at them, we shall be able to indulge without restraint in the supreme joy of the intelligence which we call 'admiration.'

"One may long, as I do, for a gentler flame, a respite, a pause for musing. But perhaps there is no other peace for the artist than that he finds in the heat of combat. 'Every wall is a door,' Emerson correctly said. Let us not look for the door, and the way out,

anywhere but in the wall against which we are living. Instead, let us seek the respite where it is—in the very thick of the battle. For in my opinion, it is there. 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. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. 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. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever-threatened truth that each and every man, on the foundation of his own sufferings and joy, builds for all.”

So now I will read about someone who attempts to build for all. And this essay and the book is called *Create Dangerously*.

On November 12, 1964, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a huge crowd gathered to witness an execution. The president of Haiti at that time was the dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, who was seven years into what would be a fifteen-year term. On the day of the execution, he decreed that government offices be closed so that hundreds of state employees could be in the crowd. Schools were shut down, and principals ordered to bring their students.

The two men to be executed were Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin. Marcel Numa was a tall, dark-skinned twenty-one-year-old. He was from a family of coffee planters in a beautiful southern Haitian town called Jérémie, which is often dubbed the “city of poets.” Numa had studied engineering at the Bronx Merchant Academy in New York and had

worked for an American shipping company.

Louis Drouin was a thirty-one-year-old light-skinned man who was also from Jérémie. He had served in the U.S. army and had studied finance before working for several banks here in New York. Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin had been childhood friends in Jérémie.

The men had remained friends when they'd both moved to New York in the 1950s, after François Duvalier came to power. There they had joined a group called Jeune Haiti, or Young Haiti, and were two of thirteen Haitians who left the United States in 1964 to engage in a guerrilla war that they hoped would eventually topple the dictatorship.

The men of Jeune Haiti spent three months fighting in the hills and mountains of southern Haiti and eventually most of them died in battle. Marcel Numa was captured by members of Duvalier's army while he was shopping for food in an open market, dressed as a partisan. Louis Drouin was wounded in battle and asked his friends to leave him behind in the woods.

"According to our principles I should have committed suicide," Drouin reportedly declared in a final statement at his secret military trial. "Chandler and Guerdes (two other Jeune Haiti members) were wounded. Chandler asked his friend to finish him off; Guerdes committed suicide after destroying a case of ammunition and all the documents. "That did not affect me," said Drouin. "I reacted only after the disappearance of Marcel Numa, who had been sent to look for food and for some means of escape by sea. We were very close, and our parents were friends."

After months of attempting to capture the men of Jeune Haiti and after imprisoning and murdering hundreds of their relatives, Papa Doc Duvalier wanted to make a spectacle of Numa and Drouin's deaths.

So on November 12, 1964, two pine poles are erected outside the national cemetery. Radio, print, and television journalists are summoned. Numa and Drouin are dressed in what in an old black-and-white film seems to be the clothes in which they had been captured. Numa, the taller and thinner of the two, stands erect, in perfect profile, barely leaning against the square piece of wood behind him. Drouin, who wears brow-line eyeglasses, looks down into the film camera that is taping his final moments.

Time is slightly compressed on the copy of the film I have, and in some places the images skip. There is no sound. A large crowd stretches out far beyond the cement wall behind the bound Numa and Drouin. To the side is a balcony filled with schoolchildren.

A young white priest in a long robe walks out of the crowd with a prayer book in his hands. The priest spends some time with Numa, who bobs his head as the priest speaks.

The priest then returns to Drouin and is joined there by two uniformed policemen, who lean in to listen to what the priest is saying to Drouin. The firing squad, seven helmeted men in khaki military uniforms, then stretch out their hands on either side of their bodies. They touch each other's shoulders to position and space themselves. The police and army move the crowd back, perhaps to keep them from being hit by ricocheted bullets. The members of the firing squad pick up their Springfield rifles, load their ammunition, then place their weapons on their shoulders. Off screen someone probably shouts, "Fire!" and

they do. Numa and Drouin's heads slump sideways at the same time, showing that the shots have hit home. Drouin's glasses fall to the ground, pieces of blood and brain matter clouding the cracked lenses.

On November 12, 1964, after Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin's bodies were carried away, some say to the national palace to be personally inspected by Francois Papa Doc Duvalier, a lanky thirteen-year-old boy who had been standing in the back of crowd to avoid the thunderous sounds of the executioners' guns, stepped forward as the spectators and soldiers scattered. He walked toward the bullet-ridden poles, bent down in the blood-soaked earth, and picked up the eyeglasses that Louis Drouin had been wearing.

The young man, the photojournalist Daniel Morel, only momentarily held the eyeglasses in his hands before they were snatched away by another boy, but in the moment he had them, he'd noticed tiny chunks of Drouin's brains splattered on the cracked lenses.

Perhaps if he had kept them, he might have cleaned the lenses and raised them to his face, to try to see the world the way it might have been reflected in a dead man's eyes.

Sometimes in Haiti, the eyes of murder victims are gouged out by their murderers because it is believed that even after death, the last image a person sees remains imprinted in his or her cornea, as clearly as a photograph.

Before witnessing the execution of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin, Daniel Morel was not particularly interested in dead men's eyes. He had been like any other boy, going for long walks all over Port-au-Prince and playing soccer with his friends. He sometimes worked in his father's bakery and tried to climb aboard Haiti's commercial train, which

brought sugarcane stalks from the southern fields of Léogâne to the sugar-making plant in Port-au-Prince. But the execution changed everything.

The next day, Daniel walked by a photographer's studio near his father's bakery in downtown Port-au-Prince, and on the open paneled doors were enlarged photographs of Marcel Numa and Louis Drouin's corpses, purposely put on display as deterrent for the country's potential dissenters. These pictures were exhibited there and elsewhere for weeks, and young Daniel Morel would walk past them, and even though he had been at the execution, he saw them each day as if for the first time and was unable to look away.

"Photography is an elegiac art," the novelist and essayist Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*. "All photographs are memento mori." That is, they remind us that sooner or later the subject will no longer exist.

"To take a photograph," Sontag continues, "is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, and mutability. "Photography has something to do with resurrection," Roland Barthes wrote. "Might we not say of it what the Byzantines said of the image of Christ which impregnated St. Veronica's napkin: that it was not made by the hand of man, *acheiropoietos*?"

"I never intended to become a photojournalist," Daniel Morel tells me more than once in the time that we have known each other. "I became a photojournalist because at Numa and Drouin's execution, I felt afraid, and I never wanted to feel afraid again. I take

pictures so I am never afraid of anyone or anything. When I take pictures, I feel like something is shielding me, like the camera is protecting me.”

Did he, as a boy, want to protect Numa and Drouin?, I ask.

He could not protect them, he said, but over the years he felt as though he had managed to protect other Numas and other Drouins with his photographs. And he makes me even more certain that to create dangerously is to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private horrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing ghosts or being chased by ghosts, even when it seems as though we full-heartedly believe in *acheiropoietos*. Thank you.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Edwidge, it’s really a great pleasure to have you here tonight. We now know or at least in your rendition we know why Daniel Morel became a photographer. A photographer he became because of an extreme situation in some way that called and beckoned him. Do you feel there’s a parallel between his urgency to capture a moment in time and archive it in some way and make it live and make it continue to live and resurrect it and your own work, your own need perhaps, urgency, to become a writer and to create dangerously?



**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** First up, I just want to say it's a great pleasure. When I kept telling people that I was coming to be interviewed by you they were saying things like, "He rocks," and—

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Well, I am interviewing Jay-Z next week.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** You are so cool.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And I actually think in some way this interview is a very good prelude.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Okay. Can you tell Jay-Z that?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I will, I promise you.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** So thank you for having me and I also want to acknowledge Daniel, who is here. I told him I was going to embarrass him. **(applause)** So—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I must say that chapter—that Chapter 11 of *Create Dangerously* on Daniel Morel is perhaps one of the most extraordinary essays I've read

in a long time actually. It leaves you virtually speechless, but let's continue, because we have a lot to talk about, so I cannot be speechless.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I don't think that's going to happen with you.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Actually, Edwidge said, "I'll be fine as long as you don't bring up some obscure Camus quotation, or if you do, read it twice so that we know what you're saying."

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I think what I had always been so curious about, you know, how people come to their art, and I—because I always felt in a way—I grew up in this, you know, in this family with a lot of storytellers with a lot of stories, some of them good, some of them bad, but it was always something that fascinated me, if one is able to even trace, I mean, there's this whole mystery of art, and I remember having this fascination myself with these two men who had lived here and then went back and just lost everything, you know, just really, literally lost everything, and they had lost family members, which had driven them out of Haiti, and then they had gone back to kind of save us all, and the story was for me epic and amazing, and I had never met someone who had this similar connection to it, and when Daniel and I talked about it, it was like, wow, and it was amazing that how, his being able to trace what he does to that moment, and I think we all have—sometimes you feel you have a compulsion to do something, but you

don't know where it comes from, and it doesn't need to be the quest, you know, of your entire oeuvre, but it becomes the—there are things that are, I think certain, you have a couple of images that reoccur again and that might have something to do with sort of what you're trying to arrive at in the creation of your art.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And let's pursue that. What are those images for you? I know it's a very difficult question to ask of anybody and to ask of writers in particular, namely where it all started. In your case, you spent the first twelve years in Haiti—is that correct?—and then you came to the United States. Where did the urgency to write come from? What were those first obsessive images? You were mentioning Roland Barthes and he quite beautifully talks about creating an organized web of obsessions. What was your organized web of obsessions early on?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, on some level, I feel like that's always changing, you know, these obsessions, and maybe they're sort of different formulations of the same obsession, which is—I think it has a lot to do with separation, silence because, you know, for a lot of us, when you were kids growing up in a dictatorship, for example, and my time sort of overlapped, some, you know, some father, some son, you know the father and son Duvaliers, and there's always, you know, this sort of this code of silence of things that couldn't slip, so I'm intrigued by silence, silence that's forced by outside and circumstances, but also you know I grew up with an uncle who had had throat surgery and who maneuvered around silence. He was a minister who couldn't speak. So sort of the contradiction of that, so silence, I think separation is sort of how families reformulate

themselves, and violence, I think this type of violence, too, and how, on some level, how certain people are victims, if you will, of it, or taken up in it or sacrificed in it, but this notion how others who could escape, you know, orphan themselves, and I think that's why this image of this execution is such a reoccurring puzzle for me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What struck you at first when you read Camus' essay, misnamed, as I mentioned to you, "Create Dangerously"? It's an editor's choice, a translator chose to call it "Create Dangerously," which then became a very good title for your own book.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Lucky for me.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Lucky for you that an editor made this choice, because in French this lecture he gave in Sweden in 1957 was simply called "The Artist and His Time." What was anchoring for you in this essay?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, there were several things. One of the things that he talks about in this essay and that he reoccurs in a lot of some of the other essays, is that he says "*l'artiste ne meprise rien*," this sense that—and I think it's hardest to translate *meprise* in English—so like, not ignore, not sort of—this thing of—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** denigrate?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Yeah, but denigrate maybe it's like one aspect, but it's the sense of—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Devalue. Devalue Because mepriser means to give a bad price to, to devalue.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** To devalue, exactly. And I think part of what was intriguing too is that I think coming and when we're talking about this issue of literacy or people who read and it's a privilege in a way if you come from a place where most people don't generally have—not everybody has access to an education. The sense of also this sense of how a large number of people are devalued, whether, you know, socially, culturally, financially, and this—that's one element of it but also this ambivalence of sort of the—this wrestling with the place—this issue of the place of art, and he talks about the sense of, you know, artists—you're in trouble if you're silent. People get mad if you're silent, people get mad if you speak. It's this place where you end, and I think he had sort of—he seemed to have had more than Sartre or the others more ambivalence, and you felt like there was a sense of all these essays about art, his sense of trying to understand a little bit what he was doing, and that appealed greatly to me because I often felt, especially when I was starting, that this wasn't even—this is not—it's not my birthright in a way. I think that people who grew up in a certain way, come from a certain place, you feel like—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** What is not your birthright?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Talking to you here at the Public Library, you know, all of it, and it feels almost like an accident. I often say it's like an accident of literacy. You know the fact that—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You have that very sentence in the book. It's very haunting.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** It feels as though then this constant exploration of what it means and what you should use it for and all that is sort of this constant question.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It's so interesting you say this, because for me—for you it isn't a birthright to be here, you seem to feel at least briefly, on this stage at the library. For me, I'm thinking, my goodness, on Monday I'm interviewing Jay-Z. What does this white kid with, you know, Mitteleuropa parents from Vienna know about hip-hop?

**(laughter)** It's the exact inverse in some very strange way, and I'm learning about hip-hop because I have an eight-year-old boy who's teaching me about the world that he inhabits now. And so in some way what fascinates me about this is that through different forms of reading and I'd like to anchor our conversation to some extent on the importance of reading because in some way your book, I keep referring to it as if it were here, but it's in my hand actually, *Create Dangerously*, is an elegy in the power and the glory of reading in some way for an island where, I think you quote a number of less than half people are able to read. More than half of the population is illiterate, and in—or not

able to read, read in different ways, but not able to read books. So I'm wondering for you if this possibility made you feel like a true outsider.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I think after you interview Jay-Z you'll become an accident of hip-hop. **(laughter)** What's also fascinating because in the book I also talk about many of our writers and it's extraordinary the number that we have, you know, given all the difficulties and given the circumstances. And I don't think it—it doesn't feel necessarily—it doesn't, you know, part of one of the clichés of the immigrant dilemma is that if you know the kids get supereducated and they're alienated from their community, I've never felt that thing, and though I live in a different even country from many of my family members and so forth, so I've felt—I mean I feel the privilege of this back and forth, but there is this feelings of—I mean, I think. I don't think it's—people often think with me it's language because I write in English, but I think there's a—there is a feeling that all people who write, for example, must feel this sense that a lot of people won't be—a lot of people dear to you, you know, in my case, even in my family, won't be able to participate in the story this particular way.

But it's you know it's one of the constant, one of the constants of it, it's sort of one of the many pillars in the room as you're writing, and I guess part of this effort at creation is that to do it despite all these things, which a lot of the writers—some of the writers I mention in the book, too, a lot of them have been able to do, because—and their voice in a way.

There's a writer like Jacques Roumain, who wrote a book called *Masters of the Dew*, and it's interesting this whole journey that *Masters of the Dew* traveled, because, you know, it's a novel set in the Haitian countryside by Jacques Roumain, a Haitian writer who was not from the countryside, and then Langston Hughes translated it into English, and then it was made into this radio play that aired on Radio Haiti, and people in the countryside then heard it, and it was if sort of this voice that had traveled through this writer had gone back, and they could recognize it and people named themselves—they named their children after the characters in the novel, which is, you know, I think the height of—it's probably the greatest honor any writer can have. So there are these possibilities—I mean there are these bridges.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** There are these possibilities and in some way I'm wondering whether the writer, the figure of the writer, in Haiti doesn't have great credence and is respected in some form or fashion, is viewed as an important presence.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Absolutely, but interesting, much more interesting to me, too, has always been the figure of the reader and, you know, my dad used to tell stories about sort of young men, and maybe he was talking about himself, I don't know, who would go around trying to seduce young women by going around carrying a book under their arm.

**(laughter)** It was kind of sexy to be a *philosophe*, you know, and so this whole, you know, this whole appeal of—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Did he ever mention which book?



**(laughter)**

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Would you like—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** No, I mean, certainly there was a time in my life where I would carry around Kierkegaard, *The Diary of the Seducer*, that was a very good one.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** No, he never, he didn't mention. I don't think it worked that well for him. **(laughter)** But we do have all these, you know, I just remember even in my time in Haiti like people who—like true sophistication was like people would say, you know, "*comme dit l'auteur*," you know, as the author said, and it didn't matter who the author was **(laughter)**, you know, and the quote would come out and then you knew they were learned, so it was this whole notion of the appeal of the reader. I mean, the writer, too, because there were some—we had some sort of giant figures in the literature like Jacques Roumain, and even some you know, like Félix Morisseau-Leroy, who walked among us—like, he was with us in Miami, for example, until he died, and people would sort of revere that presence, but there was also a kind of reverence, I find, for readers and for reading.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** and in *Create Dangerously* you spend some pages on the reader and even the title of the book, the way you interpret Camus' lecture is also not only the notion of creating dangerously but reading dangerously, exposing yourself, as

Morel did, to some ugly parts of the world, and in some way by photographing them and by writing about the ugliness you speak truth to power and I was—when reading those passages I was reminded of this line which I'd like to read to you and have you react to, since you do mention a lot of European writers and some American writers—you mention Ralph Waldo Emerson and you mention Ralph Waldo Ellison—I like that. But here you—there's a line that struck as perhaps working very well with your work and I wonder if you know it and it's a line by Kafka where he says, "if the book we are reading does not wake us as with a fist hammering on our skulls, then why do we read it? Good God, we also would be happy if we had no books and such books that make us happy we could if we need be write ourselves." What we must have are those books, and I would to say that to some extent you've offered us that book that Kafka is describing is this book. "What we must have are those books that come on us like ill fortune, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice ax to break the sea frozen inside us."

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** That's fantastic. I mean, I think we all know when we've read those types of books because we mourn them, we sort of wonder, you know, when you emerge from that book, and you're just like, when will I ever read again, we're sort of book orphans, after you read those books that mean that to you.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But did you try to do—that—Dany Laferrière—I'm sorry—

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I didn't try to do that. I took hammers to my head at times—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But what I mean to say actually, Edwidge, quite seriously, is that that chapter 11 I mentioned and the way you describe real pain and real suffering seems to me to have an urgency of trying to do what Sontag talks about when she talks about photography, trying also to reawaken, to untarnish the wound and show it clearly and actually make us shiver.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** No, I always feel and it goes back to this issue of, you know, of accidents of literacy. I always feel the weight and my pleasure of having that experience of completely being lost, being lost in something and I think sometimes it goes both for reading and for writing, you know, when you feel so lucky when you're writing where you're completely lost in it, but one experience—Dany Laferrière, a Haitian Canadian writer he talks often about this experience of the reader, of a reader who repatriates the writers, because he says, you know, he says when he wrote a novel called *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, I'm a Japanese Writer, saying that if I'm read by a Japanese reader, I become a Japanese writer, but he uses his own case of having these passionate reading experiences that I think sometimes are most heartfelt perhaps in adolescence, you know, because you're not expecting to have such a sort of passionate love affair with a book and he talks about, well he says, "these writers of course they were repatriated, you know, Whitman, Cervantes, has a whole list, otherwise, what were they doing in my room? They were living with me under the blanket with a pillow," and he sort of challenges this notion of immigrant writing. He's saying is there such a thing as

an immigrant reader, you know, and so but those I mean I think every reader knows, you know when you're having that experience of just like you don't want your—you're savoring every word, and I think one hopes to do that for a reader, you know, as a writer, which is probably where for a lot of writers, the reader and the writer overlap a lot.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You state in your book that when the pain is too great you go from writing to reading, reading becomes a shield, reading becomes a refuge.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** For me they've always been, you know together in the sense that if you felt—there's a Maya Deren quote that's the epigraph for the book where sort of the revelation of that first creation, I think for a lot of writers that is tied to reading, to sort of this amazing experience of feeling that hammer and then taking it, perhaps full-heartedly or foolhardily to that next step and saying, "oh I want to do that," and realizing too that it's not as easy, but I think that if you have that great passion, the cherished passion for reading, you're always aiming to create for others that sensation, you know, that urgent sensation that you feel yourself when you're immersed in something you really love.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Explain to me the subtitle of your book, which is "The Immigrant Artist at Work."

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, the other Camus piece that sort of overshadows this book is a short story "Jonas, ou l'artiste au travail" (Jonas, or the Artist at Work) and it's

a fascinating short story. People often criticize Camus for being a great writer, but not a good storyteller and that sort of he resolves conflicts too easily, but I think in the short stories, they tend to be so epic, and this one is about this painter, who suddenly starts having some success and then his house gets bigger, and everyone wants to have lunch with him and slowly the work gets gets, you know, it gets more pushed aside, but it's sort of a slow progression, he starts having more children and all this, and it's you know, like, and I thought if you can imagine it's an essayist's inclination maybe that he shows in actually titling this thing *l'artiste au travail*, showing this, so that's taken from that, "Jonas, ou *l'artiste au travail*," and I've had since then feeling like oh the subtitle is so wrong because it implies something bigger than it is, and it was meant to be maybe one immigrant artist at work, but there were so many. That a few that I profiled, so the proper title, or subtitle might have been, you know, "The Immigrant Artist, Maybe Haitian, Maybe Haitian, Sometimes at Work, Sometimes Not," but that was too long for the front of the book.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** When you say maybe Haitian, maybe not Haitian, what do you mean?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, the immigrant artists I talk about, some are Haitian, some are not, particularly there's another fascinating artist for me Michael Richards, who is a sculptor, who was sort of a sculptor of flight, you know, everything he did was flight-related, and he did these sculptures of his own body pierced by airplanes and people falling out of the sky, and he, it turns out, ends up dying on 9/11 in the World Trade

Center—they used to do these offices for artists, you know, they had an empty space, they would give it to an artist, and he was there that day and his whole work when you look back on it almost seems prophetic, almost like, you know, you wonder if he was what you called double-sighted, like, was he clairvoyant, did he sort of have this sense that he was going to die, and so he's in there, and he's not Haitian. And James Baldwin is kind of there in that essay called "Another Country," which doesn't mention him, but that nod, it's sort of you give a fiction writer this format and they just cram everything in, because we feel like we'll never have this chance again, so everybody's in this.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Let's talk a little bit about the format, but then I want to talk to you about what you do when the world is on fire. The format interests me because so often it's the case that essayists aspire to the condition of novelists. A very good example, I think, might be Susan Sontag, who tried her hand with degrees of success that remain to be ascertained in the novelistic form. In your case, you have gone from the novelistic form to this essay form, and I'm wondering what you are flirting with here when you try your hand at the essay, what the essay affords you that you might not be able to do when you write novels or short stories.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I have been writing over the years some essays while I was writing fiction, and what it always, you know, it sort of—it forced me in a way to be, I think, declarative if you will about certain things, even as I was forming my own feelings about things.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Did that make you feel uncomfortable?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Yeah, yeah. But I—there’s sort of. There’s such a—fiction, too, but I felt that there were many ways—I mean, I, and this, this type of essay, you can, you can, it’s even like the French *essai*, it’s almost like you can be—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** An attempt.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** An attempt, exactly.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And you know the word *essai* both means an attempt, a trial, but it also comes from the word assay, which means to weigh. So to—

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Exactly. Exactly. But I—it gives this opportunity to sort of explore something that you’re thinking in this way and to sort of play with this journalistic element, and there are truly things, you know, like, that I feel like I would be hard to do in fiction.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Such as?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Like, this piece about Daniel, like if you had this character who had this epiphany, it’s too easy in fiction in a way, you know, and there’s the thing too that in this essay “The Artist in His Time,” which I’ve been calling “Create

Dangerously,” but this where Camus talks about this too, sort of the ambivalence of things, and just coming, just trying to find a subject in your own mind, and I prefer, that goes to this term of essay, this essay that’s a kind of search, you know, and sort of trying, an attempt at trying to come to a conclusion, and knowing that it’s not definitive, but it’s saying sort of, “this is what I see, this is how I see it,” and not that you should see it the same way, but it’s sort of this moment, this moment, and there’s so much to sort of delve into from places—things to connect in a way that life helps you to and sometimes there’s some marvelous connections that occur all by themselves that are amazing in nonfiction when they come together, they feel sort of like a revelation that you don’t make happen as you do in fiction, but that the sort of the universe is collaborating on with you.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I mentioned that I would get to this point, which is the title of an extraordinary novel by the Portuguese writer António Lobo Antunes, *What Do You Do when the World Is on Fire?* And in part you describe in your first chapter what the recourse of literature was when the world was on fire. Haitians would perform a play by Camus, again, called *Caligula*, and I’m wondering whether you could in some way explain or express what recourse literature offered in moments of extreme terror and pain.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** One of the things that I was also looking into that would ask family members in the place where I grew up in a neighborhood—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Bel Air.



**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Bel Air. And there was a *centre d'étude*, a center there where people went to study and my uncle talked for years about sort of the plays that the young people put on there and one of them was I believe *Caligula* based on how they described.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were not sure.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I was not sure. I was not sure, and I didn't want to say I was sure and then somebody would come and say you lie like a rug on the floor, from what they were saying, by the time that I could belabor it they were gone, but another play that they put on was a Haitian-written version of *Antigone* by Félix Morisseau-Leroy. It was particularly poignant at this time and there was also Numa, Marcel Numa had a writer uncle, Nono Numa who had redone *Le Cid* in a Haitian setting, and they did this for example, *Antigone*, if you do *Antigone* at a time when people can't pick up dead bodies on the street it is the you know, it seems so far removed, it goes back so far to the Greeks that it gives these—that was part of their creating dangerously, because it gave them a sort of veil of credible deniability, which a lot of I think Haitian political art has, a lot of the music, the protest music, at difficult times when people could say I'm singing about a leaf, or this is a play about somebody in a time that has nothing to do with us, but if you look at the *Caligula* of Camus, or if you look at the *Antigone* of Félix Morisseau-Leroy there are certainly parallels, and the people it's meant for recognized them but it was this other way of creating without completely risking your life.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The book is dedicated, the first line is, “two hundred thousand and more.”

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, I was there borrowing from Toni Morrison, who actually—the book comes as a result of a series of lectures that they do at Princeton in Toni Morrison’s name and I had the honor of doing the second of the lectures, which was the first essay.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** She mentioned you on this stage with Angela Davis two weeks ago.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Wow. I can die now. (laughter) If not for my small children. She’s actually shown extraordinary kindness.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But just don’t.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I think in one of the epigraphs to *Beloved* is the sixteen million, it was sort of a reference to that, but I had been working on the book before, the book started really in 2008 after I did the lecture, but we were about, was about to—we were really far along in it when the earthquake happened, and I thought it was a way of acknowledging that, but the strange thing was sort of the Maya Deren quote, which was part of the book long before, where she talks about remembering, you know, memory and memoriam and sort of resisting this idea of constant in memoriam, but also going along

with that a kind of celebration and that's partly what I wanted this to be, like an elegy but also a celebration of what remains of all those wonderful things that we have left.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I'm always struck in the English language by the strength of the word "remembering," because it really means literally to put the members back together, and one of the haunting images I think in your book which comes back as an obsession is our place of burial, and I think is it your aunt who passed away I think not very long ago but who was unwilling to move from her locale because she had built a mausoleum to her daughter and wanted to be buried there, and you describe the two- or three-day journey you took in the mountains to get to her. Why this obsession and one could say interest in the very place of burial, as you are indeed very interested in Numa and Drouin's place where they were shot?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, I think because it's so—it's one of those things. I mean it's I mean I think probably for a lot of families, you know, after the earthquake of all the sad things, one of the sad things was that for a lot of people there, that there is no particular place of burial. Sort of where you're buried is so crucial. My aunt Ilyana was the one person in our family who never—she didn't go through those layers of migration that people go through first to the countryside then to the city, she just kind of stayed where my father's ancestral village was, and to go see her, it's quite a you know, I think it's like a two-day trek and I remember just bathing in nostalgia when I got there, I said to her I immediately declared, I said, you know, I want to be buried here, this is where I want to be buried, and, you know, she was a very funny woman, she looked at me and

she said, “Did you not climb for two days, who’s going to carry a corpse this long?”

**(laughter)** And I said, you know, “okay,” I said, “I’ll shift the plan, you know, I’ll be cremated,” and she said, “No, we have enough dust in Haiti, you don’t need to act.”

**(laughter)**

She was still you know, she had, we had in my great-grandparent’s graves are there, and I was you know I was thrilled to see it, but she had built for her daughter who had died young a kind of mausoleum right behind the house, and that’s where she wanted to be buried, and it’s not very unusual to go in many places in the Haitian countryside where you see a very elaborate tombstone and a very modest house, and sometimes the burial place is much more beautifully painted, much more you know, fancier than the house, which gives you a sense of what it means to your place of burial, and I often you know stretch it maybe and go I think sometimes—we’re like the ancient Egyptians in a way, we’re sort of this constant fascination with death, but not even fascination, but perhaps this understanding that death goes along with life.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** In other words it is not morbid.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** It is not—on a mass, catastrophic scale, of course, but in an individual sort of spiritual way it’s this continuation, and what was fascinating to me is that, you know, when I was staying there in the mountains with my aunt, she would have conversations with her daughter, you know, the night we were there she would say, you know, “Edwidge is here, she’s Mira’s daughter,” and it was still like—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** She wasn't quite sure who you were, also, she didn't quite know if you were the writer.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Yeah, she called me, she called me a *journaliste*, which is probably the highest kind of writer of her experience, and it was sort of an honorable title.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Not everybody gets, though, a mausoleum or a tomb. In the last chapter, which appeared first in the pages of the *New Yorker*, you describe Maxo's death and finding his remains and finding his date of birth and death on a makeshift tomb. Is it still there that way?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** It still is there.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It still is there. My cousin Maxo who actually I wrote about in *Brother, I'm Dying*, a memoir that I'd written previously to this book, died in the earthquake. And the interesting thing was that he has a maternal cousin—he's my cousin on my father's side—who sort of stood vigil at the site and was able with cooperation from a lot of people in the neighborhood, to save Maxo's wife and three of his kids, but one perished with Maxo, and she kept saying, you know, before we could get there, she kept saying, "I want to make sure that when you guys, when you come back, that there will be a place to visit, that you will be able to pay your respects someplace," and it was very important to her and I had imagined because Maxo was sort of a freewheeling

person, I'd imagine this not being as important to him as it was for this cousin, and finally when they did find him and this happened with a lot of families, they couldn't—he wasn't taken out of that, so he was just basically where they dug a hole and he was buried there but they went, which I found so extremely loving, which you see in all the also different manifestations all different places is that she had—they had cemented, and then they had put the date of his birth and the date of his death, and when you look at the date of his death to realize that sort of your individual person shares this date of death with so many people so that if we had, you know, if you had a visible cemetery that all these lives were suspended on that one particular day, and I think that was—that was sort of, filled me the most standing there in that, you know, you see the very singular date of birth, you know, of his and then you see this other date that is shared with so many people.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You say in the book that someone, maybe you had made the comment that there were not plaques around everywhere, there can't be plaques around everywhere, because the whole cities would be covered with plaques of the dead.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, actually, this was—when I would talk to a lot of people about Numa and Drouin, this execution, and as I would about other things, sort of memorial, and I sort of maybe it's from living here too long and going to, you know, a place like Washington, D.C., where you turn around and everyplace is a memorial, and I would say, you know, about a massacre of Haitian caneworkers in the Dominican Republic in 1937 and I would go to that river and I would say to myself, “well, why isn't there a plaque here?”

And so I used to say this about the cemetery where Numa and Drouin had been executed and actually right before the earthquake, when Daniel was in Haiti, and I said to him, “Daniel, like before the book goes to press, you know, take some pictures for me, I just want to make sure at that place that there is still no plaque before I say there is no plaque,” and I was saying this to someone, not Daniel, another person, before the earthquake, and the person said, you know, you know, “enough with your plaques, because if we were doing plaques there would be plaques all over the city,” and then I sort of had disengaged this notion of sort of constant memorial but this forces the situation where, and I felt it standing there over Maxo’s grave is that we are the plaques, it’s like you have to kind of be the people who are, you know, family members, the friends you have to be like the living memorial for these people, a lot of them, you know, who have no other—there is no other—there is no possible that they’re remembered except through this memory, and I had sensed this many, many years with Numa and Drouin before when I was thinking about this other kind of remembrance, and how do they live and this memory of how they transformed a young boy’s life, you know, and so now this is true for—in such a much larger sense, and that we are all walking around, we’re like sort of these—the the mausoleums behind the house of these people—many of them have no trace.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** So writing is form of haunting in some way.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Among other things. I mean, it's—I sometimes feel privileged that I have this way of doing it—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Do you sometimes feel that you have the burden of being a spokesperson for Haiti?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Not a burden, I sometimes you know I sometimes—I sometimes joke that I do PR for Haiti and it's a privilege and because like I—I love to share this other parts of Haiti that I know, this other—these writers, these creators, this art—I love, I love to share that.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That's the sunny part.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** That is the sunny part. The other part, there's no burden in it beyond the burden I think of any other artist with a story that is just—that you feel like is weaved into your soul.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You know, Edwidge, you know this, and you encouraged me to say this tonight so I will. Haiti has been part of my life for as long as I remember. My parents—it's an unknown, a very unknown story, maybe someday I'll be able to write it. My parents fled Vienna in 1938 and '39 and spent the war years in Haiti. There were a hundred and seven Jewish families in Haiti. My father, who was a medical student, became a farmer in Haiti, growing vegetables that hadn't been grown before and



which now still exist there, certain kinds of cauliflower, so that when we went to the markets of Kenscoff and Toujours and other places, he would show me these vegetables and say, this is—this is my legacy.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Broccoli.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah, broccoli, and so my father whose name is Kurt, still some people still remember him, Monsieur Kurt, you know, he is now ninety-two years old, and just this morning when I was mentioning to him and to my mother that we were talking, they of course were sending you very warm regards and my mother said, you know, It is such a different life, because we fled Vienna to find refuge in Haiti, and my mother started her love of literature by reading books that a man whose name I should mention, my mother and I'm wondering if this person, André Laraque, a man named André Laraque, whose I think brother became an ambassador would give my mother, she was thirteen years old, books to read, and so her discovery of literature happened on your island at the age when she arrived in Haiti is the age at which you left Haiti for America.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Yeah, and how extraordinary—that—you know, do we ever think of Haiti as a place of refuge, how extraordinary is that? I feel like it's something wonderful to share. And Paul Laraque was an extraordinary poet, who I think was the brother of your mother's Laraque. It's phenomenal.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The sunny side of Haiti, though, is something that you also try to bring forward by quoting and encouraging some of your readers to discover to discover some of these writers who are fairly unknown in this country but who you discovered yourself by going to the Brooklyn Public Library, so when you were twelve or thirteen years old, you discovered a shelf at the Brooklyn Public Library. Tell us something about that discovery, particularly since we are here in another one of those libraries.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** In the library. You know, libraries have always felt like, almost like church to me and I would go to that particular branch, you know, they just started having this section “la vie haïtien.” And I had not, I mean, it’s ironic, I hadn’t—I wasn’t taught Haitian literature in Haiti. You were taught French literature, read excerpts, and so when I was—when I came here I was looking for things about Haiti to read and they had this little shelf of “la vie haïtien,” and most of the books were, you know, political type books and a lot of poetry—we have a lot of poets. And then there were these two short books, the Gigi Dominique’s memoir, Gigi being the daughter of Jean Dominique the radio journalist, and the Jacques Roumain novel, which is much longer in French than it is in the Langston Hughes translation, and so I kept going back to that shelf, until thankfully it kept growing, but it was a kind of revelation that I—that in all my efforts to share writers that I love—Haitian writers I love with other people that I wish on others that sense of discovery, of just like “Oh! This person is like me, and I recognize this.” Because I think, you know, when you read voraciously, sometimes you read to escape but sometimes you read, you know, especially when you’re thirteen,

fourteen, you're looking for a kind of mirror of yourself and so that's what I found there in the library and I could never—it took me a very long time to get over the fact that you were allowed to go home with those books from the library. I was like, “Are you kidding me? I can have ten and I can take it and they trust me?”

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You have to return them.

**(laughter)**

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Oh!

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** At some point.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Oh, that's the catch, huh?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Yeah.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I did return them. It still felt so—I mean I remember just like reading through them so quickly because I just couldn't believe that I could walk away with them—that was one of the amazing things that there are very few lending libraries,

if you will, in Haiti, but the ones that they do have, you see—I see that same eagerness in the kids who are there.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were talking—we once met, both of us, we found ourselves at a wonderful literary festival in Jamaica called Calabash, which is just one of the most tremendous moments I’ve had at any literary festival, you know, interviewing a writer in this particular case, it was when you were there, it was Pico Iyer, the year after that was Wole Soyinka, with, you know, fifteen hundred people on the beach saying “yeah, man,” every two minutes, you know, **(laughter)** I’d never felt an audience so present, and you were telling me earlier on that in Haiti, there is now a literary festival where hundreds, thousands of people come and that Dany Laferrière was signing books for—did you say eight or nine hours? How do you explain that in a country perhaps where reading is such a challenge?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, it’s Livres en Folie, they usually have it either in May or June, and it’s just amazing, you know, just so packed and the hunger, the hunger to read and the reverence for these books—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The written word.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** And sometimes the agony I think for some of us to see the price of the books, but they have a program now with the National Library where they do

less-expensive editions of the books in translation that are sometimes—première at this Livres en Folie. But it's just incredible. It gives you hope.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Not to take away from that hope. The earthquake. How has it transformed writing? The writing that Haitian writers produce about their own island? And I think particularly of this new magnificent collection which has actually not even really come out now—Akashic Books, which is run by Johnny Temple, who is actually here in the audience—hello Johnny—in a wonderful series called *Haiti Noir*—*Boston Noir*, *Brooklyn Noir*, and here it's *Haiti Noir*. There is in this volume which is coming out officially in January, but we have a few copies here in advance, thanks to Johnny. There are a few stories already that are describing so soon thereafter, which is so rare, the earthquake.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Is that Farai Chideya next to Johnny? Hi, Farai. Well, this was great. We were working on *Haiti Noir* before—a year before, and then the earthquake happened and we had so many stories, and I was really scared that suddenly they would become—you know, like everything had changed. That the stories that we had just wouldn't fit. And then this amazing thing happened—they fit, you know, of course they fit, and then we started going back to some people we had contacted for stories and see if they had stories for the earthquake, and I think the challenge of writing fiction so soon after was that it's hard not to replicate the news, and so we would get stories—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You do not want to be a *journaliste*—

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, and I think for fiction it's strange because people feel like, "Oh, I know this." And so it's interesting the approaches that some of the writers have, and a lot of it is sort of surreal, and I think it's interesting to see how it's turned out. The other thing too, a lot of—this was different during the earthquake, we hadn't had this before in that suddenly these writers could speak directly to us. And I think a lot of media sources did this well in that they went directly to Haitian writers, like Evelyne Trouillot, who is a novelist, had two pieces in the *New York Times* about what it was like to be in Haiti during the earthquake. And the cover—the drawing we have—was done by Pascal Monnin and was also a part, so there was this other thing we hadn't had before. People were speaking directly to the experience for themselves. And so that but I've noticed since, too, since the earthquake, a lot of the—we used to—people who wrote nonfiction in Haiti were mostly politicians, it was sort of like the political thing. But now we have a lot of even the fiction writers like Dany Laferrière and others who are writing about what it was like to have been there during the earthquake.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** How has the earthquake changed Edwidge Danticat's writing?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** We'll have to see, I guess. It's certainly—I mean, I feel like I have to struggle even more with this idea that—because I've always had this, where it's like does it—does it—it pales, you know this notion that what you're writing pales in

comparison to what's actually happening and this thing I wrestle with myself all the time, like "Does it matter? Does it fit?" Of course, that is more now in the sense of, like, "what is the purpose, what is the purpose of this?" But, you know, we'll have to see, I mean I think of it in the same way that, you know, here after 9/11, for example, and how people started talking about how you know, 9/11 changed the fiction that people were writing or the stuff that—their creation—and it's a process. I mean, we've had—we have seen for example the first cry that is nonfiction, this *essai* if you would, this desire to testify, this testimony. But how the rest of it evolves, I mean, we'll have to see.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** My father is always obsessed when he speaks about Haiti of the *deboisement*, the fact that so many trees have been cut down, which creates incredible problems with agriculture, and I'm wondering what you feel the biggest challenge is now with Haiti, and I know that cholera is such a huge problem.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** there are so many extraordinary challenges—the fact that you have so many people, you know, homeless, I mean it just—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Nearly a million.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Just exposed to—Something like a million and a half. And one of the worrisome things is that, you know, as you go it seems, you know, it seems like it's lingering, like, there's a lack of urgency in terms of even with this, even with hurricane season having been, you know—people are so vulnerable. That's an

extraordinary challenge and what will this new place look like? Where will all these people go? Will they always be there? And their vulnerability to everything, you know, vulnerability to things like cholera and hunger and for women and girls, you know, sexual violence, and it's—it's heartbreaking on a certain level, and the fear that I have and the fear that, you know, when I speak to a lot of my relatives have, is that this will become sort of the new Haiti, like a normal, like this sort of—you get the sense that this whole thing, this very difficult way that people are living is becoming permanent, and I think that's worrisome, because you feel like it would be—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A permanent state of emergency in some way.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** But a permanent state of misery on some level, because . . .

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Better stated.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Of course there are people who, you know, because you don't see necessarily a path being offered to one of the half-million people who live in tents and under sheets and people often talk about the resilience of Haitian people, they are extraordinary resilient, but one worries that that resilience, you know, I think some people take that resilience to mean that we can suffer more than other people, and I think that's the danger.



**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I wonder if you see shards of hope. I'm taken back to a line by Václav Havel where he says hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism; there is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something make sense regardless of how it turns out.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** That's—that's, here I think the—what sort of quashes the hope here is that the people most affected are not even really part of the conversation of how it should turn out. I think that's sort of the missing link, and it's very hard to see that turning out well.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Did you—do you feel you had some kind of a goal in writing this book, something that you wanted to inspire the reader with, some form—did you want him or her to be a creatively dangerous reader, in some way seek something that he or she didn't know before and if so what?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Empathy, maybe. This I mean, reading, you know, art in general forces you to step into another body, you know, to step into other skins and for it's—we're often—I mean one of the things about Haiti and maybe the earthquake I don't think the earthquake has changed that even though we're seeing people naked, at their worst, at their most painful, at their most vulnerable, but we're still often deprived of complexity and even—you know, it's either you're super resilient or you're wretched, or perhaps it's something, you know, in between. And I want people to look for that in-between place. I am allowed more complexity if people know—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** The luxury, really a luxury—

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I am allowed that if people know that I come from this great culture, that there are people like Daniel, people like Dany Laferrière, people like Hector Hyppolite, in my culture and my background. And it sounds—you know, it's sort of a—it becomes a clichéd mantra, like in your family you become annoying if you're always citing those, but I think it's important. It makes me a more complex human being that I'm connected to these other people. I want to send people down all these paths, like, to know more, and art on some level, I think, grants us that complexity, because you have to—you're looking at the thing, but you also have to, if you're a careful reader, if you're a careful viewer, you have to take the next step and go—but where does that come from? Who are these people who created that? That's what we think when we look at the pyramids and when we think of the ancient Egyptians, and so I want to claim that complexity for people who I think are sometimes simplistic—looked at in a very simplistic and pitying way.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** A middle ground.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** A middle ground where we're not demons or angels, either. And I think that's all—isn't that what art is, always that search, whether the extremes or the middle ground? It's a constant quest, I think.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Edwidge Danticat. Thank you very much.

**(applause)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We have a mike coming up here. I'll ask you to come to the mike and to ask good, short questions.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I just want to say hi to Alix Delinois—Alex illustrated. We did a book together called *Eight Days* and Alix Delinois illustrated it. Can you stand up, Alix? (applause) And hi Farai, because Fari is also one of these people who gives us great complexity, who tells our stories so well. (applause)

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Please.

**Q:** Hi. Thank you for this book. Every book is a gift to us, so thank you. Hearing you read chapter eleven, what struck me is what has struck me throughout the years reading most of your books, I think all of your books, is the way you describe profound violence in I don't want to say a banal way, but in a poetic way. So my short question is—what is your relationship to violence that, unfortunately, is an everyday fact in many of our lives, not just in Haiti, and what is the process by which you reach the reader in a way that's deeply touching but also so troubling, I think, to see such poetry while describing horrific acts performed by people upon other people.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Thank you Taina. Taina Bien-Aimé is the executive director of Equality Now. They do wonderful work on behalf of women and girls around the world, and so Taina knows of what she speaks. Of course, I think, I abhor violence. I think it's something that perhaps you—is in a way a part of so much of our history, even though when the country came to be through revolution but there's an example, I think, in the language where torturers were called *shouket laoz* in Haiti, I translated it as dew breaker but it means someone who sort of rattles the dew, who shakes the dew. And that's always been, you know, and just the way everyday language sometimes in Creole I think attempts to address violence and that's the cue that I follow in that—something that shows that we don't want to—we don't want to live with it, but the first thing in acknowledging it in a way is to name it and you constantly have this struggle to make sense of it. For example the way—someone was explaining to me that gang rape, for, you know, more recently on women and girls is called *béton* and *béton* is like the concrete, like the sidewalk, and then you have to stop and think you know how that comes to be. So I think there is the struggle even in everyday language especially in Creole to try to address violence by naming.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Don't be shy.

**Q:** I work at the writing center at Hunter College, and I wanted to share with you that I get to read many essays of students who write about your books. And most frequently it's *Breath, Eyes, and Memory*, and I wanted to—I also wanted to think about the fact that I

work with students who are from Korea and Japanese and their take on the messages that you have to share. I mean, how do you feel about that?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, it's funny—the books in a way travel their own journey. Sometimes when I'm being lazy and I'm in a high school, and if the students say, "Well, what does that mean?" I'll say, "Well, it's your book now, you paid for it, you tell me what it means." But just in my own reading experiences, and I know that when I read *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan's book, for the first time, I was like, "Oh, that's my mother." And so there are all these common experiences that sometimes transcend, you know, particularities and sometimes the most singular thing is so universal. I'm glad when that happens, because it's kind of meant some bridging has been done.

**Q:** Hello Edwidge. My name is Roland. I just came here to tell you your book is absolutely superb, great. I'm here to ask basically your advice, and your opinion. I'm currently working on a documentary about Jeune Haiti at this moment in time and I'm currently interviewing people from that generation, that time. In your opinion, why—I'm encountering a lot of resistance to tell the truth, and their side of the story. In the Haitian culture do you think how should I approach them and they have such fear of talking about an event, and I need your opinion or advice how to approach them to talk candidly about an event.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, this, because Haiti is such a small place, your uncle had written to me, **(laughter)** and we sort of discussed this a little bit. The thing about Jeune Haiti, it's very interesting, because there were so many people—because there were thirteen of them who left Queens to go fight this battle. And then there were so many people who were almost like the fourteenth, and you often meet people like that. I think there is generally a kind of silence around that era anyway and it might be that there—it might be with Jeune Haiti that even when you read documents, internal documents, things that circulated between the men, they disagreed on sort of where their financing. So sometimes people will say they were CIA-sponsored. That's one of the reason that people don't, you know, they don't want to talk about it for that reason. There's a general silence around that—you know, the dictatorship, a couple of years ago in Haiti Jean Dominique did a program where he had people come in and talk about the dictatorship, and that took a lot, it's hard for people to talk about that because they feel that they want to leave that behind. We can talk afterwards a little bit more about that but I find a lot of reluctance, too, of people who want to talk about that. I actually wanted to talk with some family members who are still in Miami of Louis Drouin's especially, but you also don't want to encroach, to just relive this for people, because it was a very painful time, for even for a lot of people in Jeune Haiti, a lot of them were killed, had family members who were killed, but we can talk a little bit after.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** You were speaking earlier about your interest in silence.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** That's one thing—that's a very, you know, I'm amazed that Daniel was even so open about it.

**Q:** Hello, my name is Adolphe and I grew up in Haiti just like you and I don't know but whenever I read anything of yours, it makes me feel like how when I'm listening to music, someone like Michel Martelly, or some like Ali Farka Toure, or someone like Tracy Chapman, or something of the sort.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Jay-Z.

**Q:** Not necessarily Jay-Z. But even me personally and I would say that I would think that literature boils down to conversation, and even me when sometimes like I'm having a conversation with someone and the fact that I'm from Haiti. And sometimes you know like they'll ask me all these questions and I don't necessarily want to talk about whoever, whatever happened to this person, whatever happened to that person, sometimes I just want to, I guess, talk about like other things, you know, and because your writing reminds me so much of music, will your essay collection become like, instead of *Create Dangerously*, like *Create Beautifully*, will you ever write something about language or about the use of words, about things that are lost in translation about even how one would say "I love you," in Jacques Roumain or something of the sort, and will it ever become that? Does that Edwidge Danticat exist, and are you working on that Edwidge Danticat?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** I would like to quickly say one thing before you actually answer the question. What you describe as a longing already exists in this book.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** In this book.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** But go ahead.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Yeah, that's what I was going to say. I was going to say that a lot of that—you've described a lot of the chapters in the book, but what you're saying, though, is something that I encounter a lot like at some point well would you like happy things about Haiti and maybe this sort of—my melancholy personality. So this is the first time I've purposely tried to do that but I do think—I think there is that in—

**Q:** I have one more question—it's not necessarily happy things. I remember one time I was in college, I was in this creative writing class. It was a story about this, it was this story about this prostitute and a doctor who goes over to these prostitutes, to go see this prostitute, things of this sort. The first thing that I thought is my sister's in college now, whenever she speaks to me, and she calls me up, she's like a feminist, and all that, and I thought to myself, why did Edwidge Danticat, like destroy this, why didn't she say this and that, but another side of me goes, "but that was probably one of the more beautiful things I've ever read," and that's what I'm asking for in terms of create beautifully. I mean, like will it ever become like, "this is how I felt walking down some street and



looking at the street,” even if it’s not like melancholic, but closer to music, you know, closer to folk.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Would you please do that?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Create prescriptively.

**Q:** Which is why I said—I feel like that Edwidge Danticat does exist I think personally because of the way that I felt when I read that story, but I was asking does that Edwidge Danticat exist in writing?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, I think—I’m glad you said you were in creative writing. I think because the Edwidge Danticat you’re talking about I think is you. **(laughter)** I think you should write those stories. And I would read them.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** And when you do, you’ll come up here and I’ll talk.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Yeah, I think you—Because that’s the thing. You ask a lot of writers they’ll say, why did you write a certain thing, they’ll say, “I write what I want to read.” And that’s the seed of a lot of creation, you know, it’s like you write what you want to read. Because I’ll never be that Edwidge Danticat, I’m sorry. I’m already the one I am.

**Q:** First I want to say thank you especially for *The Farming of Bones*, I taught that to my class this semester after the event, after the earthquake, and it was a way of—I went to Haiti to report, after the earthquake, and your book *The Farming of Bones* was very helpful to me to kind of map out the emotions I was feeling, so I wanted to say thank you for that.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Thank you.

**Q:** The question is, when the political disaster of Papa Doc and Baby Doc was happening for decades, there wasn't this kind of global or mass sympathy for Haiti. When the neoliberal economic disaster was devastating Haiti's agriculture and forcing people into sweatshops in Port-au-Prince, again, there wasn't that same kind of global and specifically American sympathy for Haiti, but when there's a natural disaster—and of course, how natural really was it?—but when there was a natural disaster, Haitians were allowed to be innocent and Americans could have sympathy, and I wanted to ask, why is that? In terms of narrative, what's happening in the consciousness and in the narrative, that people had to be innocent and then there's allowed to be sympathy, and does it have anything to do with the narratives of race that circle Haiti and seem to choke it, especially in the eyes of an American audience?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Well, I think that particular sympathy that you're talking about, it's a momentary sympathy that's born out of any kind of tragedy. Because the only parallel I can immediately think is when we were all looking at Somalian, you

know, for my generation, we were all looking at these starving Somalian people and how often after that have we given, you know, sort of that same kind of thought to it? So I think that's something that in the moment and that even those of us who are trying to keep people from not forgetting Haiti without evoking those same particulars like ultra tragedy and the next step is what you're saying, is to bring people's attention to the source of these disasters, and the underlying questions that are not going away when those tragic images leave the screen, but that sympathy, you know, that thing you're talking about is a more long-term thing that perhaps most people don't have the same attention span for and what is that sympathy anyway beyond just that moment when you're looking at something tragic, and then you go back and have your cereal, you know? But those people who stay with it, who are concerned in some way, who are interested, they will look into these deeper issues, but that's not particular to Haiti in that sense, in that in the face of tragedy, sometimes, it's just tragic no matter who is playing the role on the screen at that moment.

**Q:** Just to push you a little bit on the second part of the question—how has racism and the narratives of race affected how Haiti has been seen?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Oh, I think, you know, it's, you know, when people talk about—I think, for example when people talk about—you know, you had this narrative that some of these op-eds that Haiti is sort of, you know, unsavable, failed, and all that, that emerged after the earthquake, that's always part of the underlying—because I think part of the conversation is sometimes, “Well, why can't these black people get their act

together, we've put all this money in?" And you think, you know, that if—sometimes I think if people, you know, if you take race out of it, and you say, you know, the United States and Haiti had to start at the same time. Imagine if this country had all the same amplified obstacles where you had a crippling debt, isolation, sort of an embargo by the rest of the world because there was slavery in other places and these slaves had formed this nation that we needed to isolate here and, you know, occupation upon occupation where other people, you know, control your finances. You know, put anybody in that situation and see how they bear out, but people never take race out of it, too, because they feel like, "Oh, Haiti's mired in this situation perhaps because these are these black people who have been trying to rule themselves for two hundred plus years."

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We'll take a quick—four questions, but quick ones.

**Q:** I'll try to make it very quick. I just want to say I'm honored to see you and hear you. My name's Joshua. I'm a filmmaker. My question is, you know, as a storyteller, would you feel limited writing for the cinema? I mean, a book is so experiential and so powerful, I get all my inspiration really from literature, and you're one of my favorite writers. I'm just wondering if you've felt that pressure, if people from Hollywood approached you, you know, and what your take is on it?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** No, I've never felt that pressure, and actually I used to work with great filmmakers who have since become friends, but I see it—I got to see that whole process up close, and I feel sort of the luxury of just, you know, all it takes me, is

just me and some paper and a pen, I don't have to gather a thousand people together to reconstruct this scene, I mean, it's a beautiful art, there's in the book also of the wonderful seventh art, but I don't feel pressured in that way at all.

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** One of those filmmakers wanted to be here tonight. Jonathan Demme wanted very badly to come but couldn't.

**Q:** Would you consider your books being made to films?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Oh, yeah, are you making me an offer?

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** Speak afterwards.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Then, yes, if you are making an offer.

**Q:** Hello Edwidge.

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Hello.

**Q:** My question is whether you consider yourself a Haitian writer or an American writer, after all, language is such an important part of somebody's identity, yet you write

in English and my second question is whether in Haiti there has been interest in your books in perhaps translating them in French or Creole and whether that your stories are valid for Haitians in Haiti or are you just writing for a Haitian American audience and others?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** I guess we would have to ask the people in Haiti. I've gone to—you know, I've had interactions with audiences in Haiti, a lot of young people. It's an exchange. It's seen as, you know, someone who left Haiti, who writes about Haiti but also the Haitian American experience, which is its own experience. I consider myself, when I consider myself at all, I consider myself a Haitian American. And yes, the books are translated, and I'm excited.

You brought up the *Haiti Noir*. I'm very—I'm very excited, because I have personal relationships with a lot of writers who live in Haiti, we know each other, and this was the first opportunity that I've had in this book we have sixteen writers, some—most who live in Haiti who we translated their stories, and many others who live outside of Haiti, in Canada and France and here in the United States. And this was one of many opportunities, but this was the first that I've had like this to put us together, several between the pages of one book, so that's one of those opportunities for that kind of rapprochement, and I'm very grateful for it.

But there is, I mean, there is, I want to point out, with the young man who came too, he's probably a sign of that, there is this wonderful emerging literature of Haitian Americans,

and it will be what it will be, but it will be something that rises out of this migration and it I think it's valid on its own whether it's, you know, whether it's hybrid, whether it's accepted by people in Haiti or not and we'll see more—we'll see more and more of these type of writers, and it's just, you know, this is really just the beginning.

**Q:** Hi. My name is Claudia, and I was first introduced to Haiti in writing by C. L. R. James, and probably a few years after that, a cousin of mine who lives in Jamaica read C. L. R. James and thought of Haiti, and I said, well, you should read Edwidge Danticat and proceeded to mail the book to her. How do you see yourself kind of bringing Haiti to other Anglophone Caribbean islands, do you feel like that's there—do you feel like—I guess my question comes from a place of—when I was a kid, I was brought up in Queens, you know, there was a whole dynamic of Haitians kind of being demonized in culture around AIDS and HIV, and I feel like now there's a moment of voices out there that can bring—I'm saying this totally wrong, but there's always been this way that Anglophone West Indian countries have kind of hated upon Haiti, I think a lot of times out of jealousy, so how do you see your work kind of breaking that down?

**EDWIDGE DANTICAT:** Again, you know, I hope it does that, if that's the case, but all I know is that, you know, when I read in terms of the cross-Caribbean thing when I read Jamaica Kincaid and I'm most loving that, she's mine. When I read Maryse Conde in that I feel like that's me, so I don't—I will go with Danny in that sense, I don't feel a border there, it's just sort of a passionate relationship with a book and a writer that I just love, so the book has to kind of grow its own wings to do the rest of that work, but as a reader,

you know, just like flipping it, being on the other side of that, you know, it's just—it becomes—it does what it does, you know. I hope it brings world peace, I do—but—

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** On this note, I will end our evening, and the people who have questions come up to Edwidge afterwards. Thank you very much.

**(applause)**