SARGASSO Interview

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Haiti: History, Voice, Empowerment
-An Interview with Edwidge Danticat

Interview by
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On April 22, 2004, Prudence Layne and Lester Goran sat down with Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat to discuss the publication of her new book The Dew Breaker. The interview was conducted before a live audience at the University of Miami's Cosford Cinema, Coral Gables, Florida. Following is an edited version of those proceedings. Danticat is forthcoming in her reflections of her formative years in Brooklyn, New York, the development of her writing, and the state of Haiti, two hundred years after its independence.

LAYNE: During the early part of your life in Haiti, you grew up speaking Creole and you were taught French in school. When you came to the United States, you began to learn English. How did you learn English?

DANTICAT: At home we always spoke Creole. French, for me, was definitely a language of school, books, reading, and such. We didn’t speak it everyday at home, and the way it was taught in school, I always felt like it was forced upon me. That was my personal experience. We weren’t writing Creole at that time in the way that people are now, so I always felt like I was speaking a language I didn’t write, and writing and reading a language I didn’t speak. When I came to the United States at twelve, English was really the first language in which I was both reading and writing, in which I had to do both. Two of my brothers were born in the United States, so when I came here my father would urge

me to speak English to them so I could learn faster. I was immediately enrolled in an ESL class. We didn’t have Creole materials or French materials then, so we had to immediately jump into English, both to write and to speak it. In a way, that was a kind of revelatory experience because for the first time at twelve years old, these things were merging.

LAYNE: Is it true that your first publication appeared in a newspaper in English at the age of fourteen about your immigration experience? What gave you the courage to write publicly at fourteen in such a new language?

DANTICAT: Well, when you’re new to a language, there is this fascination with words. I remember when we had the ESL class, trying to write essays. We were taught through classics like Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, not the whole novel, but the book in comic book form. When I started writing my essays for this English class, the first thing they asked us to write about was Thanksgiving, and I had to write about my first Thanksgiving. I said in the essay that the turkey was golden, which I thought highly original. I might have read it somewhere; it was probably plagiarism. The kids laughed at me, but the teacher said, “You should try to write.” She recommended this paper called *New Youth Connections* (NYC). It was a small newspaper that went around New York City high schools, and she recommended that I write something for them. The first thing they asked me to write—two years away from this experience of coming here—was about my first day in the United States and my impressions of the place. All I could think of (I didn’t write this in the essay because it wasn’t the sort of thing to include) was that everything was so big. I was also thinking that I wasn’t going to have time to write to my uncle [back in Haiti] because there just seemed like there was so much to do. So I wrote about things like getting on the escalator at JFK, where you feel like you’re risking your life, and all the lights in New York. I didn’t speak very much because I didn’t speak much English and I was very shy, but when the kids read that, they would come up and talk to me. I was encouraged, and kept on writing for that paper. Eventually, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
came out of that experience because just writing about the experience, about coming here, gave me the desire to write more in another kind of way.

LAYNE: Did your parents stress the importance of education or the arts?

DANTICAT: My parents were obsessed with education. It sounds like a cliché now, but they just felt like there was no other way to escape. We were very poor in Haiti, and they just felt like this was the only way to escape. My father would say, "It's too late for us, but this is all for you." This is why they came. I came on a Friday, March 21, 1981. You know everyone remembers the date of their arrival, and by Monday I was in school. Over that weekend, there was some conversation between my parents as to whether I should wait through the Spring, and then go to school in the fall. However, my father insisted that whatever I could learn during that time, was more useful than staying at home and doing nothing. So they were very, very interested in getting us settled. I remember when I didn't get accepted to the high school I chose. I had decided I wanted to be a nurse at that point, and there was a high school for the health professions. Instead, I was assigned to my zone school, the high school closest to my home, which had this reputation for great violence. My father—I still don't know where he got the courage—he went to Clara Burton High School and spoke to the principal. He said, "You know my daughter has to come to this school. This is the school for her." They reversed the decision of not having taken me. There was a kind of mission about the idea of education. The arts they left to us to explore for ourselves. There was no hindering, but there was less time and money for things like that, but the idea of education in general was very strong.

LAYNE: Do you remember what it was like growing up as a young Haitian girl in New York City and the period of adjustment? What did you do to blend in? Did you notice when your speech started to change, like so many of us who have immigrated to the U.S.?

DANTICAT: I remember the first thought I had in English because soon after I started school, I got the chicken pox, I think maybe
it was stress-related. I had to stay home for a week, and I was dreading that moment where the teacher was going to say where were you after all this time, so I practiced in my head to say “I was sick. I was sick.” I remember coming to that by myself, realizing that “Mwen the Malad” meant I was sick, and having to say it to the teacher. I was also dreading the follow up question, “Well what sickness did you have?” I hadn’t gotten that far. It was a strange adjustment at that time, and it was related in some ways to Florida because it was the first time you had a big wave of people coming here by boat and it was making the national news. There were images of bodies washed up on the beach; we’d never seen anything like that, and people were also just talking about AIDS. When we went to school, these were the things that were confronting us. People would call us ‘Voodoo doll,’ ‘Frenchie,’ ‘Boat People,’ and a lot of the kids would beat up on us. That was just a regular part of it. I remember we had an idea. All the Haitian kids in gym class, who had been beaten up, decided one day that they were going to frighten the other kids, and they had the American Horror movies, those B movies, in mind. I hadn’t realized it at the time, but we were using stereotypes to save us. The kids decided that the next day we’d come to school with talcum powder in red handkerchiefs and throw them at the kids, and it worked because they left us alone for a while.

LAYNE: So you remember your first thought in English, do you remember the first novel that you read in English?

DANTICAT: Yes, it wasn’t a novel. It was Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and again it was at my first English teacher’s recommendation. I remember reading that book with a dictionary because I didn’t get all the meanings. But I remember thinking how brave that was—the act of writing that book—because there was so much revelation in it. It was so honest and so brave. The first novel was Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

LAYNE: So those were two of your literary influences? Who else?

DANTICAT: I felt like these were first great encounters because with *Brown Girl Brownstones*, there was that sudden idea of
recognition. I perceived certain things in the book that were happening in my life. At the same time my father was trying to buy our first house, so the struggle of that and then watching the parallel story in the book was very interesting. Again, with Maya Angelou, I was intrigued by her honesty. I think it made me a little braver in writing, coming across that book. I remember my James Baldwin summer of reading. He was the first person I decided to just read everything he’s ever written because I had read *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. I also remember the great joy of discovering Haitian novels for the first time, because we hadn’t been taught Haitian authors in Haiti, at least when I was in school; we were taught French novels. It was in New York that I discovered some wonderful Haitian writers, including: Marie Chauvet, J.J. Dominique, Jacques Stephen Alexis, and others.

LAYNE: What kind of process do you go through when you’re writing? Is there any kind of alchemy involved?

DANTICAT: I don’t have a routine. I find when I start, I don’t want to do anything else. I don’t want to do laundry. You just kind of want to be in that space, life, and truth. You just want to stay there. It was easier when I lived alone because you just block out and begin, but I find it’s like a trance once you get started and you just want to be in that world at all costs. I cherish those moments. I don’t light candles or burn incense or anything like that even though I think if that would help I would do that too. There’s really no routine. I find it’s easier at night to write at night. When I can, I write at night because it’s just easier to block out everything.

LAYNE: Is writing fun, therapeutic, or both for you?

DANTICAT: Sometimes. Other times, it’s hell. There is something really wonderful about writing with just a kernel of something in mind, and then seeing this other thing emerge. I enjoy that part. I feel like the privilege of being a writer is that you really have the front row seat to the story. You find out first the little surprises, those moments where you’re like, “Oh, I didn’t know this was going to happen.” I think those are great, but sometimes writing is also very hard. The
very best advice I’ve ever gotten about that was from a
teacher I had at Barnard. At that time when I was writing,
I couldn’t finish. I would just start things and stop. She
said, “You just have to realize it’s never going to be the
way you imagined because the mind is so vast, and there
are only so many words in any new language.” You try to
get it as close as possible, but it’s never going to match
that vision.

LAYNE: You’ve experimented with a variety of genres—poetry, the
short story, fiction, of course. You’ve also worked with
the travelogue, and memoir. Which genre poses the most
difficulty for you, and is there another direction you’d like
to see your writing go as you develop as a writer?

DANTICAT: I’d like to try to do plays. I’d done a little bit when I was
doing my Masters in Fine Arts at Brown University, and I
think that would probably be the most challenging because
one has to accept the idea of having collaborators. When
you write like I do now, it’s you and your editor, but this
idea that you need other people for the writing to come to
life was something that I had to get used to. I’ve always
tried to experiment, not to feel like I’m limited to one form
because I’m very much influenced by many different
genres. That was the way I first heard stories and that idea
of just going in different directions is exciting to me. It
also offers good pauses between writing a particular type
of fiction.

LAYNE: But you aren’t just a writer, you’re also a teacher. What do
you teach your students about the craft of writing? Do
you have a philosophy of writing?

DANTICAT: The first thing I say is that we’re all writers together. I
think that’s important because it’s a process and I can’t
give you the key. There are no formulas, and what works
for one writer might not work for another. So I try to
discover what the person is trying to achieve and to help
them towards that goal because I don’t think you can
necessarily teach writing. I also like to point out what I
see students/co-writers doing repeatedly, what their
patterns are, and if they’re working for them. But I think
the best you can do is to help the person find his/her
strength. However, they must have specific ideas of what they’d like to do with their work because what I’m trying to help them do may not be what they’re trying to do.

GORAN: I wanted to ask you along those lines of whether writing could be taught. At what point in *The Dew Breaker* did you decide what the book was about? You were working on, as the *New York Times* calls it, a collection of short stories. We heard it referred to as a novel. At what point did you decide what the theme of the book was? Were parts of it rewritten to meet your theme.

DANTICAT: I feel like the structure of the book was a gift. Actually, the first story “The Book of the Dead,” I wrote when I was visiting here [at the University of Miami]. I was living in this sort of hotel/long-term motel, and I started writing this story about a daughter and her father. They were on a trip to Florida, which is why it’s set in Florida. The daughter is an artist and she had sculpted her father. The story was really meant to be about this daughter’s struggle to get her father to accept her art, but in this series of surprises, the father was so strangely moved by [the sculpture] that he confesses his past and the things that he did. The mother surfaced in both stories and there was a middle story called “The Book of Miracles” about the mother. It all spooled from this story, and I started writing other stories. I was in the throes of these people’s lives. Even when I was writing the story about the couple that is reunited, and end up living in these people’s basement, they all became connected. There were two people, that maybe by the fourth story, I felt had a connection, and the pattern started to emerge. When I was done and the editor started reading it, we actually took out a lot of more obvious connections because there were moments when it felt like I was reaching to make these people connect. There were two people that I knew would be familiar to all these people. One was the dew breaker, who is the main character, and a sort of torturer that all the people in the story are somewhat connected to, and the other is Gabrielle Fontainneau, who is this Haitian-American actress. She was meant to be a kind of light counterpart to his horror. At some point, everyone was watching her on televi-

sion, but the editor said “No, you have to take that out because it just seems too much.” If anything, we ended up paring down these connections, but to me, there were always stories.

GORAN: Yes, the famous linkage that people are always talking about, you had to work not to establish that linkage too overtly.

DANTICAT: Yes, we actually had to tone it down because, maybe by the fourth story, it was just so strong.

GORAN: How apparent to you was the idea of voicelessness? Is this a kind of metaphor that you’ve discovered as private, this kind of voicelessness of Haiti with your characters who can’t speak?

DANTICAT: I was always intrigued by voicelessness. In the story “Water Child,” there’s a woman who had a laryngectomy. I had an uncle who had a laryngectomy, and even before that he had throat cancer. My uncle was a minister, a preacher, who lost his voice. He came to the States, and my brother and I, we were very young, about fourteen, had to take him to the hospital because our level of English was maybe a step ahead of his. This idea of communicating or lack of communication, and all the different layers of that, was always something that intrigued me. When people come here, they lose their voice because they don’t speak a language, and sometimes the children have to be the interpreters. Powerlessness, this notion of using language or not being able to use language to communicate, and the way people become infantilized by their inability to speak in certain settings, intrigues me.

GORAN: I found that running all through the nine stories. How did you feel the day you discovered that the dew breaker was a scholar of Egyptian art? That must have been a great day for you.

DANTICAT: That was a great day. Actually that spawns a little bit from my own extreme fascination with ancient Egyptian culture, especially mortuary rites, and this idea that you can still refashion the afterworld. It’s almost like Masonry rites. These things that you say, it’s just like entering a secret
society. This idea that you can reshape the dead and the whole notion of preservation of bodies as opposed to the situation that people like the dew breaker created where life is not respected. I’ve gone back to Haiti for funerals over the years, and people sometimes plough their cars through funeral processions. This never used to happen, but we’re a society that’s in trouble when we don’t respect the dead, not just the spirits, but also the bodies.

GORAN: I was wondering what you were thinking about when you enrolled at Barnard for French Literature, finished there, and then went for an MFA. In French Literature, you were looking for some kind of meaning for yourself as a person who was going to deal with literature, which, as sometimes you know, has nothing to do with the creative act. Then you went to Brown, which is generally known as an experimental school where John Hawkes and Robert Coover taught. You haven’t succumbed to the temptation to write like they do, and you also haven’t succumbed to the temptation to be a French scholar either.

DANTICAT: Actually, there’s a bridge where Coover, Hawkes, and the French literature meet. This was not my specialization, but the people who most intrigued me in the French literature were the surrealists, people like Andre Breton & George Perec. I was very much intrigued with them. My studies of the French surrealists gave me a language to talk about people’s work in the program. I felt like it gave me a way to have a conversation, a bridge to the experimental.

GORAN: You spoke of good times in your MFA. How many good times can you have in an MFA before the good times start to encroach on your literary aspirations?

DANTICAT: I didn’t have that many good times really. [laughter] One of the things the MFA offers, and I think it’s a really valuable thing, is the fellowship of other writers. The idea of meeting regularly with other people who are also serious about writing, and talking about your work in a very serious way is something that you can’t really get your friends to do. They have to be objective. They have to respond. That was very valuable whether you like what they’re saying or agree with them, but these are things you can learn

from, and also to have that time for writing. I always saw it as the opportunity to really take the time and sit and write in an environment that was supportive of writing. I got to do a lot of reading, and I worked a little bit for the Providence Journal, which was the local paper. I got to do plays. You can try different things. It’s an interesting time in that way.

GORAN: I think Prudence’s question is a good one and I’ll make it my last. Can you teach creative writing?

DANTICAT: Can you Lester? I can bounce that back to you.

GORAN: I can’t. I can hope that people will learn, but I wonder whether you think that people can?

DANTICAT: Well I agree with that. I don’t think you can teach people necessarily to write. I think one example is that sometimes, especially when you teach undergraduates, you end up with people in your class who don’t really want to be writers, but they’ve heard it’s an easy “A,” so they end up in your class not very interested. I think they’re good in some ways; they are good subjects to see if there are improvements over time. What probably makes the teaching interesting is that passion. You can have someone who’s struggling with language, who’s struggling with words, but if they have a good story that they’re passionate about, they’re passionate for writing, or they’re passionate about the story, I think you can help that person. I don’t necessarily think you can teach writing, but I think you can facilitate and identify things that might take that person a longer period of time to notice about their work. When I teach, I have those students in my class, even if they’re struggling with telling the story, who have a passion. I love to work with students like that if they really have a story and they have a passion for that story.

LAYNE: What kind of advice do you offer to young people about the odds of becoming financially successful at writing?

DANTICAT: Most writers have another way of earning a living. It’s not the fastest way to make money. That’s where the passion comes in. There are people who write for many, many years...
before they’ve published. I think you have to tell yourself if you want to go into writing to make money, it’s not the wisest path, but the people who have that drive and passion will do it no matter what even if no one ever reads it. If you’re practical, you’ll send things out and so forth. But you should also ask yourself some tough questions. Would you still write if nobody would read it? Would you still think of writing if you didn’t see a clear path to publication? I think you have to ask yourself these questions because the odds are very small that most people who write will become rich writing.

LAYNE: You did an interview with Renee Shea called “The Dangerous Job of Edwidge Danticat.”

DANTICAT: She gave it that title.

LAYNE: Right, she did. You said in that interview that it’s sometimes difficult for you to go back and read some of your work like *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for example. You can read parts of the novel, but not in its entirety. This idea that Toni Morrison talks about in terms of feeling like your work’s never done. Do you feel that way? Are there things you feel you would change or do differently, even in *The Dew Breaker*?

DANTICAT: Definitely! I think if I were writing *Breath, Eyes, Memory* now, it would be a whole different book, so I think there’s always that feeling when you’re reading, even when I have to read it aloud, that there are things that just make you cringe because you’ve had the experience of writing, and then you have the experience of having done other things, but I wouldn’t take it as far as trying to redo it. I always say to myself this is the best I could have done then, and it also represents what you were doing at that time. I take the opportunity when I have to read out loud to rewrite certain paragraphs and people are scandalized by the markings in my books because they feel like I’m desecrating the books. Of course there is always that feeling that you are never done, but there’s that moment when you just have to walk away.

LAYNE: What one thing in *The Dew Breaker* do you think you might have changed, and I ask you that only because it’s your most recent work?
DANTICAT: I feel like I would have gone back to the daughter one more time. Even though I can’t imagine how it would have been, I might have returned to her a little bit more.

LAYNE: What’s interesting for me is that the dew breaker is never named, and we see him as a dew breaker, a father, a barber... I think he speaks to the idea of marassa that we see in your work, and the fact that we have a Ying and a Yang. Is there some significance you place on not giving him a name?

DANTICAT: Well he has a name. He calls himself Bienaime, but it is a name he gives himself because he has changed his name. I didn’t name him because even the name he has is a fake name, and I wanted to leave the possibilities open. Haiti suffered a very long dictatorship of which the dew breaker was a part, a dictatorship that lasted twenty-nine years, and there are so many people like him, from that period that we are literally unable to name.

LAYNE: Does the name Bienaime mean well-liked?

DANTICAT: Well-loved.

LAYNE: The second part of that question was whether one of the themes of the book was forgiveness. We see the dew breaker through his daughter’s eyes and his wife’s ability to forgive him for killing her step-brother.

DANTICAT: It approaches forgiveness in a complicated way. Should we forgive? I don’t know that we have the right to forgive him so much, but we also have to acknowledge that these people are part of our society and to acknowledge the circumstances which created them. Would they have become something else if there were other possibilities for their lives? It tries to address all of these questions, especially in a place like Miami, one of the first places of flight next to the Dominican Republic, where you have so many of these people walking around and we don’t even realize it. What do we do with them? Do we completely consider ourselves outside of them?

LAYNE: In a sense though, isn’t the dew breaker transformed by his wife’s love? Doesn’t he become something else?
DANTICAT: He becomes something else. I think, not to excuse him particularly, he had been caught up in something, but he wanted to get out and he was looking for ways to redefine himself.

LAYNE: I've heard you say that your books are more autobiographical in spirit than in source and actual details. What kind of sources did you use to write *The Dew Breaker*?

DANTICAT: *The Dew Breaker*, I feel, shows my last, constant exposure. Having been born in a dictatorship, and then leaving in '81, this book covers the last lengthy period I lived in Haiti. I was always fascinated by that period because you get it when you're young in fragments (you hear so and so had to flee and so and so had to go), and I really wanted in my writing to revisit and to piece together these things. That was really the beginning. As I go back to our conversation about voicelessness and silence, it was so hard to get my parents to talk about the dictatorship. They just say, "We survived, and that's it." They don't even want to talk about it. A lot of people still don't want to talk about it. It was unlike *The Farming of Bones* and trying to unearth testimony. This was more recent. I found that I could confirm a lot of things in the newspapers and in *Life* magazine. *Life* magazine, it turned out, wrote a lot about the Duvaliers, so that you could use journalistic sources. You could unearth things that you vaguely remember. For example, there was a day when they said we couldn't go to school because there was this American ship in the harbor, and I could read a thousand words about that in U.S. newspapers from that period. It was an interesting mix this time. It was a level of lived experiences, reluctant testimonials, and these journalistic sources.

LAYNE: One theme that I see in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker* is writing trauma—the trauma of history—on the body. Sophie, for example, is the product of her mother's rape and her face reminds her mother of the event. Here, the dew breaker has this horrific scar on his face. Could you say a little about what that speaks to—the trauma of history/history as trauma?

DANTICAT: It's perhaps as simple as this proverb, "Bay you blive, pote mate sonje," which means the one who gives the blow may
forget, but the one who bears the scar remembers, and it gives you that marking in a physical way, but in a very marked-on-the-flesh kind of way. The dew breaker has the task of both having given the blow and carrying the scar. The abuse too was psychological, and in so many cases, it was so physical. People were beaten, tortured. The body was attacked as well as the soul.

**LAYNE:** In some ways then is life more arduous for those who leave than it is for those who stay in Haiti?

**DANTICAT:** It depends. You can’t generalize because there are people who have extraordinarily wonderful lives, and others who suffer daily. I think it depends on the circumstances under which people are living.

**LAYNE:** Would you go back and live in Haiti, and under what circumstances?

**DANTICAT:** I would go back if I went to live in the countryside. That’s the only place I think I could live, in the countryside, because the social structures of the other places would be too difficult.

**LAYNE:** I wanted to bring up a personal essay you wrote in 1996 in *The Caribbean Writer* called “We are Ugly, But We Are Here!” (Nou Led, Nou La!). It proclaims that the very essence of one’s life/existence lies in our ability to survive. You also questioned Haiti’s legacy. I wondered in this bicentennial year of Haiti’s independence if you would reflect on what you wrote back then, more than eight years ago, about what it means to be Haitian, and the lessons that still remain to be learned.

**DANTICAT:** I think that this is a very important year, and it would have been regardless of current events, but more so in light of the fact that, for example, for the first time since independence, you have French troops on Haitian soil. No matter where you are on the political debate, even to think of what that means in terms of where we have been in the past two hundred years, and how we have gotten along together. Are we able to solve our own problems, and what this will mean for the next two hundred years? In that essay I tried to talk about the absence of the contributions...
of Haitian women, who I think have not really had the opportunity to contribute as much as they could to the rebuilding, to the moving forward of the society. I think it's a year that everyone knew would be bittersweet, in terms of where we started compared to where we are now. Now it's even more painful and even more disturbing in a way. But I think it's even more important now to acknowledge that it didn't take away from what we have done. It doesn't take away from what we accomplished.

LAYNE: That's a nice segue into my final question about your contributions. I know you're a bit young to be talking about legacy, but what kind of legacy might you want to leave behind as a Haitian woman and writer?

DANTICAT: Wow, legacy is a big word. I guess these books because I feel like these are really the closest things to myself, to my soul, that I could leave. In some ways they have been important to my own survival, and I hope that they can be important for others as well.