

Myriam J. A. Chancy



Recovering History “Bone by Bone”

CONVERSATION WITH EDWIDGE DANTICAT

EDWIDGE DANTICAT CAME TO NATIONAL ATTENTION AS A PROMISING YOUNG American writer at age twenty-four with the publication of her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), a bildungsroman produced at the crossroads of US and Haitian realities recounting the travails of a young Haitian girl displaced from the arms of a warm, woman-centered family, to rejoin her estranged mother for a new life in the United States. Once there, Sophie, the novel’s protagonist, must confront the shadows cast on her life by the Duvalier regime and the haunting of her own begetting through the rape of her mother by a Duvalier henchman, or Tonton Macoute. Lyrically rendered, the novel opened a path for the inclusion of Haitian realities in the American imagination and opened the door for the publication of Danticat’s short story collection *Krik? Krak!* — nominated for the National Book Award. Commenting on one of the stories in the collection, “Night Women”, biographer Lenore L. Brady offers that Danticat’s reader is “immersed in a spatial and temporal split...a split [that is] determined by the politics of race, class, and gender and articulated in an angle of vision that combines the stark reality of a single woman’s material impoverishment/poverty with the spiritual abundance/hopefulness of ancestors and angels” (205). Such a description of Danticat’s work can well be applied to her latest offering to the literary world with the appearance of her second novel, *The Farming of Bones* (1998). *The Farming of Bones* delves into a stark moment of Haitian history, commonly known as the Cane Field Massacres of 1937, when Trujillo, the then-dictator of the Dominican Republic, ordered the killing of Haitian field workers within the Dominican borders in an effort to “de-Haitianize” the DR. Given the continued animosity between the two nations and the continued exploitation of Haitian workers within the DR, the novel provides a mirror to contemporary actualities even as it seeks to unveil the terror and errors of the past. Sensitively written, the novel follows the story of Amabelle Désir, a young domestic living in the DR at the time of the massacres and betrothed to a cane field worker who himself goes missing. Invoked throughout are “ancestors and angels” — the guiding forces of spiritual awakefulness in a time of darkness and the seeming extinguishment of hope.

In the following interview, Danticat speaks of the parallels between the Haitian genocide and

the Jewish Holocaust in terms of the need to provide testimony for the departed. Our conversation began with a fortuitous error on my part over the award garnered by *The Farming of Bones*, fortuitous in that the clarification which followed provided the foundation for a fruitful discussion on the gaps and liabilities of “official” history and the plausibility of redefining and creating multifocal identities within the Americas. Forthcoming from Danticat, in collaboration with Soho Press, is an edited collection of writings by Haitian/American writers entitled *The Butterfly’s Way* (2001).

MYRIAM J. A. CHANCY

First of all, I wanted to congratulate you on the National Book Award, for *The Farming of Bones*. Part of what that award made me think about is the fact that it seems to me that one of your roles as a writer — one of the roles that you take up — is to be a witness for Haitians, especially those Haitians who don’t have a voice. I wondered if since you received the award you’ve felt that there has been more attention paid to the traumas that Haitians, common Haitians, have been enduring throughout history, not just in the present.

EDWIDGE DANTICAT

In a way, the award that I got — and by the way, it’s not the National Book Award — is an even more special award in that it’s the American Book Award given by a group called The Before Columbus Society. They define America by all the Americas so that there were maybe thirty of those given out to novelists, poets, editors and so on. That was a very special award. It was given out in LA and my parents went [to the awards ceremony] and, in a sense, I felt, especially with this book, that it was really satisfying since the subject matter deals with a struggle over the scars of history. And this award, given by The Before Columbus Society, addresses those types of scars. So, I was very glad to get that given their definition of American, because people like me struggle with the definition and this is a very inclusive definition of America that acknowledges all of the Americas. So, I was particularly happy for the book to have received that.

I think that awards in general... well, often I get awards I’ve never heard of...

(LAUGHTER)

this wasn't the case with this one. But, I think awards in general are very nice but what happens as a result and everything that has happened for this book, I felt so glad if one more person heard about this subject. The subject matter of *The Farming of Bones* was very important to me because, as I kept stressing to people, it's not something that's over. When you talk about history, there are things [within it] that hurt but if you feel that you are honoring some kind of past pain, it's different than staring at a wound every day, which this is still. It's not something that we've buried and put behind us, as Haitians or as Dominicans. It's something that people are still living everyday. Just like the other day, there were all these people being shot at the border or, every other day, you hear about some people being deported and the truck turns over, and the bateys there still exist. It's living memory. It's a war still. Anyone who says to me, "I've heard about your book, and I never heard about this and I went and got another book," to me that is the most interesting part of the project because there is no memorial to these people who died, except this horrible, living pain. So, at least people learn about it and are informed about it. And that's important.

MC: Actually, when you were talking about the idea of living memory or the lack of memorial, I was thinking about my trip to Cuba. When I went to Santiago, I visited the Moncada [Barracks], which is the fort that the revolutionaries had stormed in, I believe it was in 1956, when the Revolution was not yet successful, and the Moncada has been turned into a school. Half of it is a school and half of it is a museum and the side of it that's a museum shows you what the rebels tried to do, how they were defeated, and there's a torture chamber that's been kept. There's a room that actually shows you the implements of torture, how they were used, and where the bodies were lying of those who had been killed. So, it's quite paradoxical that there is that memorial and then there are these children. On one level, on a spiritual level, I wondered what this might do ... going to school so close to the spirit of the dead but, at the same time, it made me think of Haiti and places where people were tortured, under the Duvalier regime and how we don't have those memorials yet. And it made me think about the fact that we don't have them yet because there is still, as you're saying, an on-going persecution of Haitians, whether it's across the border or within Haiti. So, that lack of memorial — it seems that the text that you produced, that others have produced, are so important so that we don't forget the history. They have to be markers for on-going battles. Right?

ED: Well, a friend of mine, Patrick Sylvain, a poet, was saying once that Haitians have not had a good, long cry because there's no time. It's just a moving on to the next battle. Ever since 1804, we're going on to the next fight. We're always going on to the next fight. And perhaps it's that, I think, Haitians who leave Haiti earn the luxury of being able to look back and cry on some level. Just being in Haiti — everything is a struggle: driving, lights, electricity, phone, everything. Everyone is so wrapped up in the daily struggles, both small and large ones, that I think that now the next thing are the elections and you're always moving on to the next thing. So, when I think of Jean [Dominique] for example, I always think my God. When he was in exile, I worked with him here and part of my introduction to the anthology [*The Butterfly's Way*] is about him. He was here and we used to talk about the people who were being killed. And now, to have his name added to that...

MC: ...to that list.

ED: He's the first of these people that I knew personally and I think the great fear that you have is that this is going to be just another name added to a list and that people are going to just forget and [get] used to things like that. I think maybe, that from here, from the other side, it is an extraordinary luxury but maybe that's why Haitians spend hours and hours discussing the situation even though they're not living in it, because they have the luxury of distance, to pause while people who are still there are dealing with it so much. But, these monuments, I think that even the ones we have aren't cared for as they should be. I've had this experience, you know, when you're just driving by any road and there's one wall and someone will say this is from the time of "la colonie" and it's just a wall and you think, it looks like this thing that's out of place in a rice field, it looks old, but you don't know what it is. Even the Citadel — I'm told that there are sometimes Dominican buses that come and they never tell people they're in Haiti. Or people go to Labadie* and they never tell people they're in Haiti. I have friends who have gone on cruises and they say, "They told us it was an island."

MC: That's right. It's one of the new stops apparently now. I had an acquaintance who went on a cruise and went to Labadie and came back saying "I went to Haiti. I saw Haiti." But she never [went] any further than whatever beach they were dropped on. That contributes to the lack of memory.

ED: I think it goes back also to these daily struggles. There's nobody guarding our legacy, you know? I know people who were in the service during the second invasion who talked about people just taking cannon balls and if you go to the Citadel someone will sell you a cannon ball. And if you want one, you can walk away with it.

MC: Everything's for sale.

ED: It's just out in the open. And maybe it's because the daily struggles are so great that we haven't put aside the time for that kind of museum you're talking about, in Cuba.

MC: That's part of it. I guess I also get a sense — when I was standing in the Moncada — of feeling this great pain. Not because of just what had gone on there but that people there — even though Cuba is going through its own trials — they had a sense of something that was past. What they're going through today is what they're going through today and it isn't connected [necessarily] to what happened before 1959, in the strict sense. Especially for Afro-Cubans since life was much harder before the Revolution, for most Afro-Cubans. And so, I think I was struck by the fact that there is a way in which even though the Duvalier regime ended in 1986-87, for many people, even people who are outside of Haiti, all of the things that happened during that time, [are] not over. And it's not to say that we're only speaking of Duvalierisme or Neo-Duvalierisme but a sense that, because there's been so much forgetting or putting aside of memory, sometimes simply to survive, that there hasn't been an opportunity to almost regain one's footing and to learn the lessons of the past in order not to repeat them. Do you see what I mean?

ED: Oh, yes, it's true.

MC: Actually, that makes me think of the epigraph to your novel from Judges because when I read that I had to stop before proceeding into the book, not because I didn't want to go ahead and read, but because I didn't remember that passage from the Bible. It was chilling because it was a reminder of how history repeats itself. It's such a perfect parallel to what has been going on between Haitians and Dominicans for hundreds of years, at least for the last hundred years or so, even right down to the numbers killed mentioned in Judges, 40,000, which I think is the number that many Haitian historians have used [to estimate the numbers killed during the cane field massacres].

ED: Yes.

MC: So, it made me think ahead to the contemporary situation because I wondered about your intentions in using the Judges epigraph. It made me think of how history is repeating itself today.

ED: My Uncle is a minister, a Baptist minister, and I was talking to him. He was asking what I was doing and I told him and he was the one who told me about this passage. I'm not knowledgeable enough about the Bible to quote scripture except for a couple you learn in Sunday school. But, when he told me about that, I thought, for me, it was chilling as well. And other people would keep telling me other things about [struggles] between different groups, like Iraq and Iran, and they would explain to me certain works but it was just that I couldn't find certain documentation. But they would tell me stories in which differentiation would be used to tell people apart before they were killed. So, for me, I learned some valuable things/lessons doing the anthology... Sometimes I meet people who want to write and they have this idea that because you are Haitian or because people haven't heard all we have to say that it's new. I'm not even talking about universality and all that but there are people who think it's all new. Sometimes, you think that if you read enough, you'll encounter this, that there's a lot that people repeat in their actions.

We had twenty-nine years of a mad dictatorship. In the DR, they had 30-some-odd years of Trujillo. These people, they are mad but there is also a sort of mad genius in what they do. Trujillo, for example, studied Hitler, and there are pictures of him dressed like Hitler. Duvalier studied the people and used myth and folklore as his weapons, as his mental weapons. They also studied the past and maybe even without knowing it something had been [implanted] in them about the ways people had been terrorized before. You can't be one person, surrounded by a couple of people, and hold millions of people hostage without some sense of history yourself and what's being repeated through what you're doing. I think that's what, at times, puts the people at a disadvantage who are the victims of this history. But the people who are the perpetrators know what has happened before and I truly believe that consciously or not, they have examples of what works in horror. And so, for me, when I got to [the passage in Judges], it stopped me. But, today, some Dominican friends told me after that they had a similar experience...it happened to me yesterday...when you get to the airport, you know. Man — I had never gone

through so many immigrant screenings because we were flying “Air d’Haiti.” And, you know, all of a sudden, the customs man wants to have a conversation: “What were you doing? Where do you work?” Just to hear you speak. Some Dominican friends have said that coming from Puerto Rico, they get a whole lot of conversation so that they [Customs] can hear the difference in certain words they’re asked to say. Because Puerto Ricans and Dominicans speak differently.

MC: It’s a way to classify people.

ED: Yes. And so, there’s that. If you take it further, there’s that kind of continuation.

MC: I hadn’t known about that. One of the things that I’ve been exploring, looking at the three countries, has been racial formation — just how race works. Because what got me started on the project is the fact that I’m part Dominican — my grandfather on my mother’s side was Dominican.

ED: Yes. You told me. A bunch of Haitian families are like that.

MC: ...which is also something that isn’t talked about. One of the things that intrigued me growing up was that I didn’t know that family. There were three things, when I was growing up, that I knew about in terms of Haitian history that were always talked about: the Revolution, the US Occupation and the Massacres. One of the things I had to deal with was that, in my case, the Dominican connection was a positive one. The Dominican part of my family had emigrated to Haiti in order to, actually, have a better life. Of course, this was when Haiti was doing far better [economically] than it is doing now. And so at the same time in terms of the history my sense of what I was told of the Massacres was that there was something terrible going on, on the other side of the island, that we didn’t want to know about. Then I was confronted with the fact that I was part Dominican and that there wasn’t that animosity within my family. So, one of the questions I always had to deal with is race because that grandfather came from a family [which included some well-known writers, whom] I just discovered as I’ve been reading who have been quoted as being racist, anti-Haitian. It shocked me because I started realizing that the racial issues are really, really deep. I needed to understand why I had the impression that my grandfather was white even though he was mixed. I wanted to figure out why there was all this animosity between Haitians and Dominicans. At first it seems — well, it is racial — some people talk

about it as “ethnic.”

The difficulty to reconcile is the fact that under Trujillo a lot of dark-skinned Dominicans were killed. In the conversation I had with Loida Maritza Pérez about her novel *Geographies of Home*, we talked about the fact that Dominicans have also been scarred by Trujillo, their own identities and memory. But, to identify as part-Haitian or to understand that there is a very narrow connection between the two communities is to have to awaken to that history and it's not something that's easy to do especially if you are dark Dominican because it puts you at risk within your very own community.

So, what struck me with the opening of your novel was the twin birth, because I know that with *Breath, Eyes, Memory* there was the marassa [cult of twins] theme running through, which I thought was such a compelling way to speak of the ways in which history has conspired to distort vodou imagery and the ways in which people connect with one another. And in this novel, there is something similar going on, especially because we have a physical twin. I think Doctor Javier says: “It's as if the other one tried to strangle her.” The lighter-skinned child is larger and the darker-skinned child is female and is the one who survives. I had to wonder about that because the other thing that was interesting in that scene, the birth scene, is that the mother, Valencia [who is Dominican], suggests to Amabelle [her domestic] that the girl-child takes after Amabelle. There's definitely a connection between the two women as if they know they share the same blood, the same history. I wondered if that was intentional. Well, it seemed as if it was intentional but I wanted to ask you about it.

ED: Well, it was intentional in the sense that, to me, it's always been fascinating to me, this whole idea of the DR and Haiti as one. It's sort of the opposite of the marassa. It's the same but it's also the opposite in a way because it's one thing that's split in two as opposed to two things trying to become one, it's one thing split right down the middle. [With twins] we are told that it's one egg divided down the middle, in the womb. It's always fascinated me that — and perhaps this is my perception — for most people, even those who have Dominicans who are family, I don't think that we [Haitians] are daily consumed by Dominicans the way Dominicans are with Haitians. I'd heard of people going — to cut cane in the cane field, to work in the cane field. Still, I was with Ségin this last time and we were up in the mountains and someone said “Fi sa a li tal dan Dominicani y li vin tounen rich” There's still

that illusion of people going there and then coming back and so forth. And I thought it was more dissipated. And the whole thing about this history and the Occupation and this forced joining, there is a fear on both sides that it's going to become one mess.

I didn't think of it all that way through but I think that the idea of perception is one thing. But, what was most interesting, once you got close to the border, was to notice how inevitable the mixtures are. Maybe it's that rare Dominican who can say "I am a pure White." But, sometime the discussion stops when people will say "Well, look at my Uncle. How can I be racist? He looks like you. You could be part of my family." And then you're looking at the Uncle who silences the discussion that needs to take place, that the Uncle is not looked at in the same way as the other Uncles.

MC: Exactly.

ED: And there's that uncomfortable way of not being able to talk about things because there is this whole range in families, as there are in Haitian families. In the same way that sometimes we are uncomfortable saying that when one child enters the room, everybody is cooing as opposed to when another child enters. That happens in Haitian families too.

MC: There's still the issue of colorism. It's interesting because it's a broader issue that Haitians have not talked about, as much as they should, I think. I know that even surrounding the political issues today or even the discussions that happened, that I was privy to, mostly in the States, after Jean's [Dominique] killing, people talked a lot about color. When of the things I've experienced is that people...make a lot of assumptions about class and privilege based on what I look like and I'm always forced to acknowledge that there's a way in which, when people think of Haiti, they will divide the population into the 90% and 10% and not allow themselves to think about all the things that have happened over time since enslavement to the present day. Even though it is true that Haiti looks far more African than the other nations, whether it's Cuba or the DR, or whatever, there are lots of mixings that have taken place, and though the racial issues are definitely still there with respect to the darker people, we haven't faced the fact that there is also the class issue and that it often crosses the color lines. The reason I've been thinking about this is not only because of my own background but because of the fact that, for example, dur-

ing the Occupation, there were a lot of rapes, lots of children who were born from the results of that, from Americans who were there...

ED: ...or even from the recent Occupation.

MC: Exactly, and also with the crossings to the DR. I'm not fascinated by it but it's a question that keeps coming back. It's like a haunting in a way: the way race is utilized in order to oppress darker people across class and, of course, that disadvantages most Haitians in the general population. There's a way in which by denying the fact that there have been these continuous mixings prevents a conversation about what race means now and why we're still using race as a way to classify people and to either marginalize them within Haiti and the DR, and refuse them certain kinds of rights, human rights in particular, or shut them down elsewhere. What I'm leading to is that with the twins, it seemed that there was an allegory being posed in the novel. I like the fact that the daughter is the one who survives. Not because I wanted the lighter child to die or something but there was something in the fact that she had survived and gone on. Even Valencia at the end of the novel talks about her and Amabelle is able to see all the photographs of her growing up and being the darker child in all of the pictures. And the fact that Amabelle was connected to her at the beginning of the novel suggests that there was a commentary on your part about Haitians being able to survive, whether it was racial encoding, whether it was class encoding, that there was more to [her survival] than that.

ED: For me, I think that we have to — and this is a recurring question in the anthology too — I was very surprised how much color was mentioned. And in reading the whole thing through and reading other things [I concluded] we have to accept nuance. But Haiti isn't like Brazil, or these other places. There is a mixture but the majority of the population looks African. Sometimes that is linked to class, to the extent that some people who are darker will go to places, for example, at the airport, and speak French to differentiate themselves from the rest of the people. There's often a very strong effort to say "I'm not what I appear" — if you appear a certain way.

For instance, I went to visit a friend of mine at a hotel in Haiti and I spoke to the man at the front desk in Kreyol and the man said to me: "Madam, li trop bon pou ou vin la. Tann a swe." The implication was that I was a prostitute picking somebody up. I had to really struggle then not to slip, the thing you need to do to

get the apology, to speak English, or to speak French, that whole thing. I think there are many cases where judgments are immediately made based on how someone appears — there I was with my braids, etc. We have to also, in some way, acknowledge that people's appearances will immediately box them in. I have friends who will say that people assume that they're this [or that] because of what they look like, but it works both ways. So, even as we're looking at those things and we're saying this of the DR, I think it's also important to look at them in ourselves and see, maybe, where we duplicate these things.

MC: I think, as you were saying, Haiti is different in its racial mixing from a place like Brazil, or the DR or Cuba. What I've really had to think about carefully is that the Duvalier regime emerged out that whole "Noirisme" idea, to uplift the Black within Haiti, and a lot of harm was created through that by Duvalier, in terms of the arms he gave out, the kind of terrorism that occurred. This isn't really a question but a comment: I'm still wondering what kinds of repercussions we, as Haitians, whether we're in Haiti or outside of Haiti, are suffering because of the psychological game Duvalier played with color in order to be able to control as many people as he could throughout the country. I think it does us harm not to examine the way we are both anchored to the colonial heritage in terms of racism, but then also its distortion within the Duvalier regime. You see what I mean?

ED: Oh yes. And I think that at the same time, there are exceptions. It's been said of Jean [Dominique], for example, in spite of the things that were written after he died; I don't ascribe to that in his case because I think that if you ask the people he helped, they would pause because it's not the first thing they would remember about him.

MC: Exactly.

ED: But you're right. First the colonial legacy — was it something like seventy one categories of people — and sorting through all that. Also, what's harder to get out of is that there are times when color is linked with class and privilege. Here, you know, Bill Bradley has talked about "white skin privilege"; maybe there are, on both sides of the border, light-skinned privilege. I think also that we are further ahead than other places at the same time. But, I think that if we are going to look over there [DR], at other people, I think we also have to look at ourselves with these issues. When I go to people in Haiti and then they immediately start judging, seeing [race] in black and white, I say to them "Look at your own privilege. Do you [look at] any

Black people in America when you talk about the colorism here and so forth.” So, I think we need to do the same, practice some kind of auto-critique at the same time as we look at what has been going on in these other places.

MC: It’s an on-going challenge, I suppose.

ED: Oh yes. For me, writing about the twins, I think it starts with children. What’s most interesting in that relationship is the fact that they are twins and not-twins. And, it’s common in the literature — how sometimes the blood surprises you. Even in Amabelle’s case, for example, even if the [Dominican] father had stayed back in Spain — you can go back with the Spaniards to the Moors. You can’t live in these places and think you’re pure blood. I think that’s what was so ridiculous about Trujillo’s notion of the purity of blood.

MC: That’s right. He himself wasn’t pure.

ED: That’s the idea of his wearing the powder, make-up, and so forth, and hiding his own grandmother in his closet. It occurs over and over in Caribbean and colonial literature and it occurs because it is true that this child was sort of a surprise, a manifestation of something even in the husband’s past.

MC: It was interesting that you made sure to say that she looked like her father so that it was clear which is not like in other stories I was thinking about written in the 1800s in America, usually by white writers, but also in Britain, where the child was always a surprise because there had been an infidelity of some sort. In this case, it was very clear that you were saying this about how these communities are inter-linked, going back to Spain, but also within the island.

ED: Oh yes. I read so many of the biographies of Trujillo that he commissioned where he literally re-wrote his history. You can’t re-write that history. You can only re-write it to a point especially when the child shows up. That’s inevitable.

MC: The other thing I was wondering about in relationship to the epigraph from Judges was the overall tone of the novel. And also the fact that Amabelle has her own dedication which is something I haven’t seen before — the narrator actually gets to dedicate the novel as opposed to you dedicating the novel to Metrés Dlo — which I thought was very nice and which is also interesting to me because of what you were saying earlier about Haitians not crying a great deal. There are so many pas-

sages from the novel where people laugh at moments where you know we would want to cry the most. So, it's interesting that Amabelle — whom I don't believe ever does cry in the novel — is always linked to rivers. I think there's that English expression crying yourself a river.

ED: Yeah...crying yourself a river.

MC: She is protected in these scenes by Metrés Dlo to whom she dedicates this story. What I wanted to ask first about was that tone because it's very clear that you want to keep yourself as an author from judging, from judging history, from judging those who were involved in that history, from laying blame, it would seem. Especially given the fact that we have Amabelle's relationship to Valencia and at the end of the novel we find out how Valencia survived that moment in history [of the cane field massacres] and how she tried to help those that she could, even though she was in a marriage with someone who did not respect those Haitians who were working on his land. And so I'm wondering about, as a Haitian novelist, as you're trying to retell this story, and the horrors of these times, as you did in your other works on contemporary history, how do you try to both tell the story and keep from laying blame. Because one of the things I also noticed is that despite that tone, there is a subtle linking throughout the novel of Trujillo's regime, Vincent's collusion in Haiti and what you call the "Yankee presence" on both sides of the island. At the times when the characters seem the most afraid of what this massacre means, or the impending massacre, they make references to the "Yankees" and the occupations or that "the Yankees are coming back." The question, then, is about judgment. How do you try to tell the story as honestly as you can and still keep yourself out of the area of providing an authorial judgment?

ED: I think and I've always tried not to take the easy way out of things. When I talk to people, you know, sometimes it's not easy. Over *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, I've had so many fights with people. And I would say to them, "Why don't you look more closely at what is making you angry?" I think we're in a position as Haitians, and I include myself in this — a lot of our hands are dipped in blood in some way. Just our own history of how our people were treated by our own makes it hard to sit in judgement on other people and that's always in the back of my head when I think about this massacre. I think first of these people, how they were treated, and then I think of them going home and their government receiving fifty cents for

their lives. And when I was writing for the New York Times editorial journal, I kept thinking of Duvalier selling those people for money. It's not simple. It doesn't serve what we're talking about, it doesn't serve the issue not to look at the complexities of it. For me, our role in it is always the one thing we have control over on our end. That's the one thing that if we collectively were willing to stop, we could stop; we could more affect what we're doing rather than what other people are doing. That's where the idea of judgment for me comes in.

MC: We're only the masters of ourselves, in the end.

ED: Exactly. We can't talk about this massacre without looking at our role, what role we played in this thing. People would not leave in the first place if their situation wasn't so bad and that's one idea. That's one path to travel. Second, definitely, at that time, or in that period — General Compere Soleil, the Alexis' book, I think talks about this very well — the US Occupation of that time and the sort of larger forces, which in some way could have unified both sides of the island under this occupying force for nineteen years. The Haitian side had it longer but I just think it's important to look at the larger picture. It was hard to pass judgment in the case of this story because I kept finding nuances. For example, even today you can find nuances in that every time they deport a truckful of people, there are always a couple of black Dominicans. Even today. There are people who are like your family, like families of friends I have. It's not always black and white. So, for me the best way around that judgement is to try to understand the nuances in the issue and that, you know, as they say, when you point a finger, you have four other ones looking back at you.

(LAUGHTER)

MC: That's a great expression! I also notice that throughout your work you have great respect for your characters. I know that with some of the stories that they're based on people you've met or stories you've been told. Clearly, you wouldn't have been able to meet people of this particular time-period. But I wonder if you crossed the border, in the Dajab-n area, maybe the first time you went there if you had a feeling of being in touch with the spirits of the place, of the land? Because your characters speak a great deal about the land and the novel enters into the complexity of that relationship. The title itself comes from a line where you write, "cane life, travay tè pou zo, the farming of bones." It's as if the people, the braceros [cane

cutters/field hands] especially, are working the land, but they're working death. And so, this is connected to giving the narrator her own dedication and to what you're saying about understanding. You want to understand your characters and you give them that respect and that leads your readers to have that same respect as well.

ED: I think growing up with poor people in Haiti, you realize the duality of their lives. And even going to the mountains this time with a friend of mine, I'm always so aware when I go way in to the countryside in Haiti how much poor people are marooned in some way. Still. I think for me that was always at the front of my consciousness. I always viewed how people had to belittle themselves, people who were kind of giants in their house. Or when people came to the United States and they have to take their child to the doctor or the child has to take them to the doctor because they don't have language. For me, the kind of people I write about, I always wanted to at least try to speak of them intimately. First of all, when people are poor or when they serve other people they're almost assumed to be invisible. The idea of Amabelle as the servant to me was very important. Her working in the house was a very powerful idea for me. And that's why I decided to write those little sections where it's just her thoughts, her remembering, her memory. Because it would just contrast the silence that is forced on people who work for others. There are moments when she speaks about working for others, the duality you have to have — you have to be invisible but always be close by for them to call on you. People assume that people who serve don't have an interior life, that they don't have laughter, or people assume that they know nothing but this side that they show. I was talking to someone about this, to Renald Roméus, the painter, and we were saying that sometimes people have to be in the presence of other people, marooned. You have to smile, to giggle, but sometimes you have to hide your intelligence if you're serving people.

I did want to hand over this text to Amabelle because I felt it was her story and her story in the way of testimony, similar to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a story like that. I was always most compelled to understand larger events by reading one narrative. For example, with Anne Frank, she's in this enclosed space all the time, and you're receiving this interior life. In the sections about Amabelle's interior life, I thought of her relationship with the people and their relationship to the land and also people's attempt to return to that land.

You have this too with immigration in that when people migrated they sold their

own little piece of land to go work other people's piece of land in the DR. The land goes from being their partner, their friend, almost their lover, like in [Roumain's] *The Master's of the Dew*, to becoming an enemy. That's when the whole idea of "travay tè pou zo" becomes working the land to die or to grow bones. The whole idea of burial for the old man — the idea of having to bury his son in this hostile land is very hard to take that he can't even share it with the community. He can't let himself be comforted because of this idea that he's putting his son in the ground, there, in this hostile land. Marquez, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, said that you don't really belong to a place until you've buried your dead there. And the idea of still belonging after that. You have the sense that for Joel's father, he's not going to leave ever because his son is now part of this place. So, I think the relationship to the land is transformed. Your respect for the land is not the same because, as my father always said, you lose everything if you don't even own the ground under your feet.

MC: The idea of dislocation makes me think about how migration has shifted so much for Haitians, away from France and Canada to the United States since the seventies, and this whole idea of burying the dead. I think about it in a personal way because I used to think of myself as an exile and now I think of myself as dislocated, displaced. I'm not sure how to ask this question but there's a way, I think, that a lot of Haitians who are outside of Haiti, and those within, are haunted by these kinds of things — the massacres, the terrorism under the Duvalier regime, the army in the early nineties, the kind of instability that's going on now. Where do we bury the dead, or do we bury our memory? I don't know how to ask that in a simpler way.

ED: I had a moment once where I realized that this whole group of Haitians belonged here. I used to live in a building on Flatbush Avenue [Brooklyn, NY] when I just arrived here; that's where my parents were; and there were all these Haitians who lived there. For the first period, maybe the first ten years, whenever somebody died, they would send their body to Haiti — routine — no doubt about it. They would have a service here like a wake and there was even one house that people used who had a relationship with a house in Haiti, a funeral home. You always knew they would go back until one day something like five years ago, this one woman died while she was on vacation in Haiti and they shipped her body back to New York. And I thought, my God, things have really shifted for this small group of maybe forty people who had lived in the building. I couldn't ask for an explanation but I

listened closely when I went to the woman's house to see if people would ask, "Why?" It came up and one of her daughters said, "Well, we want to be able to visit her grave." It occurred to me that it wasn't that they were going now to go every year and have a mass as others had done and that's when I knew, that at least for this group of people, the shift had occurred. I think it's the same for Joel's father and it's a heart-breaking realization, maybe, that perhaps we bury our dead where we are. Maybe while we're doing it, we're realizing, "Oh, maybe we're not going back."

MC: Before, you spoke about the privilege of being outside of Haiti, and being able to look back. Do you find that there is also a kind of difficulty in being outside of Haiti and looking back, especially for you as a writer?

ED: Well, I think then you enter that authenticity debate that you encounter in every group where you have migrancy, the inside/outside debate. My answer to that is that I think everybody has their own Haiti. If there even was a point in doing the anthology, a mission, for me that's one thing that I wanted, for all those people who were hounding me, especially all those people who want you to represent them in their unique way....

MC: Their Haiti.

(LAUGHTER)

ED: Yes. In this anthology, there are rich people; there are poor people. And there are all these different experiences and sometimes people will say the exact opposite of what some others would say and that excited me quite a lot. Yes, everybody has their own Haiti and that goes even beyond the questions of class and gender.

MC: It's how one remembers even.

ED: Yes, exactly. But I think sometimes that younger people are afraid of that because they can be easily silenced. People will say to them: "Ohoh. Sa ou konin? Ou pat la. Ou se ou ti moun." There is this whole generation, this whole group of people who are conflicted. Sometimes Haitian people are nicer to the white people who write about Haiti than the Haitians, or Haitian Americans if they're young. Maybe this is in Haiti's advantage that everybody thinks their love is more than the next person's.

MC: At least there's a lot of love.

(LAUGHTER)

ED: Frankly Myriam, I don't think, given my family's economic situation, I don't think I would have been able to be a writer in Haiti. I probably would have written but I don't think I could have afforded it. It's a privilege that migration has afforded me. I probably would just be struggling to make a living, that I wouldn't be able to be sitting down and writing. So, I think we are all doing that thing that we are given and sometimes I feel like — going back to what you talked about in the beginning — I think we are in places, if you are in Canada or in the United States or if you are in France, where there are more opportunities, for publishing and so forth. But I think that what I'm writing has as much to do with Haiti as it does with migration. But I don't think I'm cheating anybody of an opportunity to write, what they want to write but sometimes that's the perception.

MC: I think that all you've said is well taken and I think that migration does afford opportunities that one couldn't have. One of the things that I was reminded of is when I was in Haiti last year and I did an interview for a radio show and I was asked what I thought were the greatest struggles for Haitian women. You know, I rattled off all of the different things, and at the break the person who was interviewing me said that to do work on women's issues in Haiti was very difficult. In fact, it could be very dangerous, whatever class you might be in. She talked about her sister, who I believe is an activist and upper-class, but who has been shunned by everyone in her community because of the work she does. Also when I talked to members of the women's cooperatives, some of the issues that could not be spoken aloud were clearly serious issues — we talked about things like domestic violence — but we couldn't really talk clearly about rape or the AIDS issue. It made me think about how much work those women are doing on the front lines and yet there are things that they can't talk about and it seems that for those who are on the outside and have the privilege of going back and forth or speaking our mind — it's a privilege I won't take lightly.

ED: Absolutely. It's not only the social dangers. There are women I know who are working with women who were raped during the coup. I think people assume that there are built-in divisions and that there are ways in which women can't help each other.

But it comes at a cost.

MC: Absolutely. I think because I was raised in Canada — well, Haiti and Canada but I went to school in Canada — there are certain things I have yet to understand about the United States. I've been in the States ten years but there are lots of things that I still don't understand about the US, especially racially. It's led me to think about the fact that the US has so much history in the Caribbean. What I've been discovering as I've been doing this project is that I don't think it can be easy to be both a Caribbean person and American. I remember talking about this with Maritza Perez and she was saying that in a way it's something that you can't separate in terms of identity. And, also, when I spoke to Magda Campos-Pons, the Cuban artist — she came here in her late twenties for the first time, I think, and then stayed. She spoke about how she saw the United States as sort of a place to travel through, that if she hadn't come here, there are certain things she wouldn't understand about Cuba but then that there will be another place after the US. That made me pause and think about, again, it's like what you were saying about everyone having their own Haiti, that you can still define yourself culturally in ways that either incorporate an American identity or, even if doesn't, still provides you an opportunity to have a different perspective, which is also an opportunity, I would think.

ED: Absolutely. It's an opportunity for any artist or for any writer. It's hard to step out and look at things from the outside. We are, supposedly, outside of society anyway, not that you have to leave the country. Even inside the country there are people who are doing certain kinds of work. Even living inside they are looking from outside because that's their work.

MC: Well, I have two more questions connected to what you've just said. The first one is about Father Romain who early in the novel claims that "Memory, though painful, will make you strong." And at the end of the novel, I believe, he's the same person who loses his mind.

ED: Yes.

(LAUGHTER)

MC: It's interesting to me because Amabelle comments on how, on some level, she wishes she could lose her mind because then she might forget. And then she talks about being dead but remembering. I'm sort of wondering about that whole

idea...the way I'm connecting it in my mind to what you've just said about migration is how psychosis can be a way of being on the outside. I'm also thinking about people that I would come across when I was a child in Haiti; this would have been in the late seventies. They were supposedly crazy but they were perfectly...sane? I don't know how to explain that. People who did not do the normal kinds of things — for instance, I remember this woman who had a very small child and she spent her days picking up colored pieces of glass, and when I would ask about that, people would either say that she was crazy or they would say, matter-of-factly, that this is what she was doing and they wouldn't really question it. The way I read it was that it was a coping mechanism...

ED: Exactly.

MC: ...that she still knew what was going on and, of course, at that time in history with all the things that were going on in Haiti, there were lots of people doing odd things because that's just how you survive. And so, at the end of the novel, I was kind of thinking that Father Romain has lost his mind but I think it's his sister who says he has moments of clarity.

ED: One time when I was at the border on a market day, a man, exactly like the Professeur, was strolling. He would always show up on market days wearing a suit. One time he grabbed me and kissed me and I had a reaction. This woman said, as I was trying to wipe the kiss away, that when a crazy person kisses you, it brings you luck. I didn't quite believe. You don't believe but it made me think of Haitian optimism. A friend told us a joke when in Jacmel. He said that that this is a Haitian way of looking at things — a man is hit by some bird-do and he gets mad. One of his friends says, "Why get mad? Look at the up side of it." And the man says, "What could be the up side of this?" And he says, "Just be grateful that cows don't fly."

(LAUGHTER)

ED: That made me think of coping mechanisms exactly as you were saying, and that humor for Haitians is a huge coping mechanism. Even before the tragedies happened, a couple of blagues [jokes] developed around them so that maybe, in lieu of having a good cry as we were saying earlier, in lieu of crying, that's what we do — we laugh.

MC: That's right.

ED: And maybe even — these same ladies were telling me — behind every mad man there's a small kind of genius. And when you think even of people who have a mental illness — maybe it's a kind of a mindful concentration, like the professeur at the end who kind of strolls the river. Or Father Romain who is obsessed with the kites. Maybe it takes someone who is extremely hyper-focused on one task to forget the larger things in life. But the professor, in his own way, is a survivor.

For this book, I read a lot of Holocaust memoirs. People coped in many different ways. There were people who committed suicide thirty or forty years after the fact. And there were people who became wealthy but they became, I think, auto-focused or they had their own way of forgetting. And Amabelle was hoping to forget but she couldn't. The Father and the others were able to sort of disappear into this other kind of darkness. People are seeking different ways of escaping the pain. Psychosis too is a way of the mind helping us out, blocking things out.

MC: That's right. Without romanticizing mental illness, I'm also thinking that within the novel and within real life, it's almost as if those are the memorials, the memorials we were talking about that don't exist. When you travel through areas that have experienced great harm, great harm to human life and you find people like this, it is a reminder of what has happened. Even if they have forgotten. You know what I mean? It's that sense of a living testament to the horror that would lead to that kind of forceful forgetting.

ED: Oh yes. I was reading all the essays again for *The Butterfly's Way* and we used yours as the closing essay.

MC: That's nice.

ED: I think of what you said about — I remember so clearly because I just read it again — how much you said about the body remembering pain and maybe the body remembering also good touch. I was really struck by that because I concentrate more on the pain myself. How wonderful a thought that is. Just now, I was thinking that when the book starts over in a way, it's kind of like Amabelle remembering the good touch.

MC: That's right. Because it's after all of this has happened. That leads me to my final question which is about butterflies — partly because I've always had a thing about butterflies.

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(LAUGHTER)

ED: One of my life's obsessions.

MC: Yes.

(LAUGHTER)

MC: I was struck by that when your work started appearing — there are always butterflies and the anthology is called *The Butterfly's Way*. When I was growing up, I used to think there's something Haitian about this but I don't know what it is so, when your work came out, I said to myself, "Ah, I was right." The thing I've had with butterflies is that — I mean, I know that universally, people think of them as a symbol of hope — but one of the things I've noticed in my life is that butterflies always appear when I have my most difficult moments and they seem to appear when I need some kind of sign that things are going to be all right. The other thing I've noticed is that when I've traveled to places where there's a lot of harm there's always been a lot of butterflies on that land. I've written a little about this in the sense that there is another way for us to remember if we notice, the spirits of the departed. I think that I read somewhere that butterflies have a very short life once they actually emerge.

ED: Very...

MC: So the question is very simple. I just wanted to know what butterflies have meant to you and why you make use of them so often?

ED: In a very raw way, primal way, I was not as aware of that whole cocoon/butterfly metaphor that people always associated with my obsessions with them. My notion of them is that I would always notice them in the highest places.

I'm doing this brief travel book about walking in Haiti, walking to high places. I'm going back in September with Sonia Sanchez, who has always wanted to go to Haiti. So we're going to go walk up to the Citadel with her. And so just going high and the whole idea of the saying "behind the mountains, more mountains" — My family is from this place that's a ten hour walk from the nearest city and having to walk there as a child and being so resentful and going back there as an adult and all the different spins of walking higher — I've always noticed these butterflies. This last time, I noticed this very green butterfly that I had never seen before in my

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Calabash

life and I became obsessed. So, this winter, I have to go to Butterfly World to see or get a book and find this green variety. I always feel closer to heaven when I see these butterflies. When I saw them in low places, butterflies are like moths. They are not attractive.

(LAUGHTER)

So, I always associate them with going higher and as a child I always knew I was closer to home when I would see a butterfly. So I think they sort of stuck in my head in that way.

MC: Did you live in the mountain?

ED: We would spend summers in the mountains. We lived in the city but it was always a kind of journey and we would walk and walk and walk and we stayed overnight with somebody half-way. So the whole idea of seeing them — they seemed to belong to this other world. It's similar to fireflies — if you could only see them for longer

(LAUGHTER)

MC: Which is the beauty of the firefly. When you see them, it's like a little miracle.

ED: Exactly. And that's how I felt about these butterflies. That they were like little miracles. And this time I saw these green ones and I thought, "Of course, maybe they're blending into the trees." Unless they fly, you don't see them. They're so green, they're like the leaves. I've been afraid to do it, to look at a book that has a very careful study of butterflies because I feel that's going to kill the mystery for me.

(LAUGHTER)

But I think, for me, they're associated with high places. Maybe they're small manifestations of angels.

MC: I believe that. I think they're like spirits on earth. Well, just the image that you've used, closer to heaven. It's like they're a piece of heaven on earth.

ED: Exactly.

MC: It can make the most desolate place seem quite beautiful.

ED: They're so ephemeral and so beautiful and going about their business. That's always been extremely interesting.

MC: Well, it's a wonderful title for your anthology — *The Butterfly's Way* — because it connects to that idea of survival — looking up, moving up — and the idea of being closer to heaven.

ED: And walking an uncertain path also.

MC: Yes. And that we're all walking different paths but for the same end. Well, thank you so much, Edwidge.

ED: Thanks, Myriam.

MC: I really appreciate the conversation. This was great.

ED: My pleasure.



**Labadie is a beach resort situated on the Northern coast of Haiti.*