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Edwidge Danticat: The Haitian Diasporic Imaginary, by Nadège T. Clitandre

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Nadège T. Clitandre, *Edwidge Danticat: The Haitian Diasporic Imaginary*.

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018. 249 pages. (Paper US\$29.50)

Edwidge Danticat: The Haitian Diasporic Imaginary constitutes a significant contribution to the growing body of scholarship about the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat. Nadège Clitandre puts diaspora at its center, seeking to understand Danticat's work through its exploration of the dynamics and affective impact of displacement, and fruitfully considering her writing in relation to concepts such as echo, silence, and voicelessness.

Clitandre presents Danticat's "diasporic subjects" as the foundation of her wide-ranging yet cohesive archive of national and diasporic histories, arguing that her vision of diaspora "insists on both cultural and historical preservation and transformation and involves symbolic returns that can engender real returns and fruitful dialogic relations with the homeland" (p. xiii). This dialogic exchange provides an essential framework through which to consider Danticat's writing, with Clitandre arguing that her diasporic imaginary moves backward and forward, deconstructing and reconstituting the nation and its silenced archive. The book's argument is finely attuned both to Danticat's deployment of the multiple realities born of diaspora, and to the creative opportunities produced thereby. *Edwidge Danticat* connects several of Danticat's works by placing voice at their center, and presenting them as riffs on the Echo and Narcissus myth. In Clitandre's convincing reading, Danticat creates characters who "face the threat of silence through state-sanctioned violence and patriarchal monologism" and "participate in the recall of Haiti's silenced histories to tell their own stories" (p. 7).

Chapter 1 presents a historical overview of Haitian migration and diaspora since the Duvalier regime. While it provides context for Danticat's work and will likely prove helpful for readers unfamiliar with the history it discusses, the chapter seems somewhat out of place in this volume since it is largely unmoored from Danticat's writing. Chapter 2 explores *Create Dangerously*, reading its effort to rescue and build community from heterogeneous, polyphonic voices as "an homage to the power, survival, and persistence of individual voice and its relationship to a collective history of state-sanctioned violence" (p. 66). This chapter is particularly attentive to Danticat's use of Alèrte Béalance's story to foreground the silencing of female subjects in Haitian national discourses and literature. Chapter 3 continues this theme, examining the use in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* of a matrilineal diaspora through which black women's literature can expose and disturb the male-centered narratives of black diaspora. It is sharply focused on the opportunities and strategies

through which women can reach for self-definition and self-preservation in a diasporic context.

Chapter 4 views *The Dew Breaker* as a text that rewrites traditional narratives of the nation in order to open spaces for the mother figure and the female voice. Clitandre argues that Danticat interrogates key concepts for both nation and diaspora (such as family, ancestry, community, origin, unity, and history), playing with their plurality and possibilities to undermine and revoke univocal, often paternal, authority and its fixed meanings and framings. Chapter 5, which is especially rich, centers on *The Farming of Bones*, presenting it as a reclamation of silenced, traumatic pasts in which memory, “ghostly echoes,” and the spiritual world offer protection from—and even become spaces for resistance to—the fictions and manipulations, linguistic and otherwise, of oppressive and violent nationalism. Clitandre proposes that the critique of nationalism in *The Farming of Bones* extends to the racial, gendered, and class-based discourses by which nationalism is served. But the novel also presents borders and borderlands as sites of communion, and of mourning and memorializing the dead; as such, they are rich with opportunities for reconfiguration both spatial and symbolic. In the epilogue, Clitandre reflects on the image of the voice box in relation to Danticat’s “quest for voice and the experience of voicelessness” in the context of diaspora (p. 171).

In addition to providing a solid critical foundation through which to organize the growing scholarly corpus on Edwidge Danticat’s work, Clitandre’s book is valuable in situating Danticat’s narratives about women within the larger narratives and discourses of the Haitian nation, its diaspora subjects, and its literature. In so doing, it confers significant authority on Danticat’s opinions about and interpretations of her texts, at times in ways that risk constraining Clitandre’s own analysis. Nonetheless, as a sustained piece of critical analysis through a single lens, this book is an important contribution to the study of Danticat’s rich and extensive oeuvre. A productive approach to a fertile subject, it makes clear that there is, thrillingly, still much ground to cover.

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