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*Approaches to Teaching the Works of Edwidge Danticat*, a collection of fifteen original critical essays, was published in 2020, but the idea for this important and timely edited volume germinated in 2016, when the libraries at Indian River State College (IRSC) won the National Endowment of Arts (NEA) Big Read Grant. While there is now substantial scholarship on Danticat, including most recently a few edited volumes on her body of work (which is well deserved for a prolific writer), this 380-page edited volume is distinct in its focus on pedagogy.[1] The editors describe the book as the first work to “provide a pedagogical approach to teach and interpret Edwidge Danticat’s collection of works—both fiction and non-fiction—for undergraduate and graduate classrooms” (p. 1). The volume gives readers an opportunity to reflect on how practitioners of the humanities develop and foster pedagogical consciousness to promote critical self-reflection, cross-cultural communication, transnational solidarity, and social justice. Given the narrative of the humanities in decline or at risk in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and seemingly bleak opportunities for humanities scholars in the academic job market, this volume is a refreshing read that recognizes the work of cultivating empathy, hospitality, and solidarity as rigorous labor. This labor matters and is essential in our increasingly globalized and yet polarized world. As the editors state, “Danticat’s writings may help us in building more compassionate and relational human communities that are grounded on the imperative of human dignity, respect, inclusion, and peace” (p. 2). These values and goals have always been important to foreground when analyzing or teaching Danticat’s work since the author’s entrance onto the American literary scene in the mid-1990s. But this generative endeavor to examine pedagogical approaches to Danticat’s work in light of pressing issues of the twenty-first century and amid a global pandemic offers instructors the opportunity to (re)evaluate their own courses and (re)consider radical and transdisciplinary approaches to the study of literature in liberal arts institutions of higher education.
I begin this review by stating the timing of the collection from conception to completion for a few reasons. Between 2016 and 2020, the topic of immigration, a key theme in Edwidge Danticat’s oeuvre, was not only at the forefront of political debates in the United States, but a divisive issue in the country. In 2016, the US elected the forty-fifth president of the United States, Republican ticket candidate Donald Trump, who ran a right-wing populist nationalist campaign with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” During his term as president, Trump promised to build a wall on the US-Mexico border and make Mexico pay for it; worked toward canceling programs offering protection for immigrants, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status; and supported family separation and opposed birthright citizenship for US children of illegal immigrants. These promises were part of the Trump administration’s zero-tolerance approach to deter illegal immigration. He also imposed travel bans (which included restrictions against five major Muslim countries—Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen), and called Haiti and African nations “shithole countries.” All the while, he advocated for increased immigration for people from Norway and Asian countries and supported Reforming American Immigration for a Strong Economy (RAISE), a bill introduced by Republican senators to promote a merit-based immigration system designed to prioritize “highly skilled immigrants.” This anti-immigration rhetoric propelled by Donald Trump (pp. 128, 177, 286) and global right-wing movements is the backdrop against which the contributors to this book are reading, writing, and teaching Danticat’s work. Although Trump is no longer president, the impact of his administration’s policies and rhetoric reverberates.

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Edwidge Danticat is divided into four parts. The first part, “Critical Literary, Historical Narrative, and Transformative Pedagogy,” consists of four chapters that offer epistemological and methodological frameworks for teaching and engaging Danticat’s texts as narratives of migration. Chapter 1, an analysis of The Dew Breaker, focuses on geopolitical inequities and the question of cyclical violence that engenders emigration. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which the short stories in Danticat’s collection Krik? Krak! are used as counternarratives that affirm and empower first-generation Haitian youth. The three authors of this chapter detail the formation and development of the Haitian Empowerment Literacy Project (HELP) in South Florida and its seven-week summer institute program for middle school students. Grounded in the idea of the concept of the Lakou, elaborated by Dr. Charlene Desire, one of the founders of HELP and a coauthor of the chapter, the authors insist on Haitian epistemology as a central framing for a literacy program for Haitian youth in Florida. They reject classical universalist models of literacy in favor of black literacies that adhere to the principles of liberation and self-determination. The program is an example of culturally relevant liter-
acy instruction that attends to the specificities of Haitian youth. Chapter 3, contrarily, embraces formalistic approaches to the study of literature as productive pedagogical tools for examining migration narratives. The theory of genre and the short story cycle genre more specifically are examined as points of entry that allow for fruitful discussions of formal structures and processes of classification. What is most fascinating in this chapter is the way the author discusses genre-based methodologies to address and confront ambiguity in literary texts, which the author sees as “a potent pedagogical opportunity” (p. 59) that speaks to the particulars of diasporic migration and experiences of displacement. Chapter 4 describes an NEA Big Read Book collaboration between librarians and instructors at IRSC. The authors discuss the use of the free app StoryCorps to teach *Brother, I'm Dying*, record personal narratives of migration, and highlight the significance of oral culture. It pushes the discussion on alternative literacies by examining the relationship between writing and orality in the digital age. All chapters in part 1 cohere around the inevitable tension between the universal and the particular that arises when engaging literary texts more broadly, and Danticat’s work specifically. This section also engenders further discussion on widespread calls to decolonize universities.[2]

Part 2, “Gender Alliance, Pedagogy, and Engaged Learning,” has two chapters on female solidarity and black womanhood in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*. Chapter 5 attempts to engage global conversations on the idea of womanhood through an examination of the literary tradition of black female authors. Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in particular is examined as an example of the ways black female authors infuse lived experiences with historical facts to rewrite discourses of black female body. Chapter 6 centers themes of female mentorship, cross-generational female relationships, and relationship between mothers and daughters in *Krik? Krak!*. Both chapters rely on the legacy of transformative scholarship in the ‘90s.[3] Indeed, the chapters remind me of why I was drawn to Danticat’s work as an act of self-discovery. Reading *Breath, Eyes, Memory* during my first year in college profoundly influenced my then budding career as a literary scholar and my own intellectual thinking on the experiences of African diasporic women writers and their literary contributions.[4]

But while some fundamental issues remain the same in gender studies, a lot has changed in the past ten years. Many questions that speak to the lived present are not addressed: How do women create transnational solidarity while complicating universal notions of womanhood? How are feminist studies and queer studies scholars deconstructing and transcending the dichotomy of female strength against male aggression in ways that point to the significance of (gendered and heterosexist) language in dismantling systems of oppression? What does healing mean and look like now to “Danticat’s daughters” and new generational cohorts like Generation Z, the generation raised with the internet and social media? How is trauma and healing articulated in contemporary studies of black girlhood that converge with and diverge from scholarship in the ‘90s? How are we examining the black female body in the wake of “woke culture,” which is now being weaponized by the Right? How do we read Danticat’s oeuvre and the literary tradition of black diasporic women writers in light of the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and hashtag movements such as #sayhername that foreground the oppressive experiences of black men, black women, black transgender and nonconforming people? What are the ties that bind readers and writers across generations and create more inclusive approaches? While it is important to remind readers of the diasporic black women literary tradition in which Danticat’s work is rooted, the contributors in this section miss the opportunity to discuss new trends and theoretical frameworks in scholarship on African diasporic women writers. An additional chapter on more recent discourses that move
the needle in scholarship on black diasporic women writers would have remedied the gaps in this section.

Part 3, “The Global Classroom, Transnational Community, and Cross-Cultural Communication,” includes five chapters that expand the discussion of pedagogy within global contexts. Chapter 7 uses the experience and outcome of the Big Read Holland Area community-wide reading program at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, to elucidate the implications of turning a book (in this case, *Brother, I’m Dying*) into a community text and community spaces (such as coffee shops, church basements, libraries) into classrooms. The chapter promotes experiential learning (learning by doing and reflecting) and embraces the idea of writing as an act of discovery: “In the end, we were no longer just studying a writer’s story—we were studying each other’s stories” (p. 132). Chapter 8 hinges on the pedagogical philosophy of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. The author of this chapter teaches *Brother, I’m Dying* and *The Farming of Bones* to fourth-year college students reading English at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana to introduce students to the theory of ethnic conflict and conflict studies. Chapter 9 focuses on a pilot program that “aimed to incorporate global learning opportunities into the college curricula” (p. 168) at State University of New York (SUNY). Through the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiative, students at LaGuardia Community College in New York and Dominica State College in Dominica interact through virtual discussions via skype and blogging on *Krik? Krak!*. The instructors of this team-taught course find the interactive international online collaboration to be an inexpensive alternative to these intercultural exchange programs that require physical movement. Chapters 10 and 11 are both authored by Celucien Joseph, the lead editor of this volume. The two chapters bookend part 3 with resource guides that offer multiple approaches to reading the memoir *Brother, I’m Dying*. Chapter 10 provides background information on Haiti’s history, its political and economic conditions, and recommended readings and topics of discussion. Chapter 11 turns to themes in Danticat’s work, such as family, religion, and the representation of women. I would recommend these two chapters to instructors who are not familiar with Haiti’s history and literary tradition. Part 3 of this volume is evidence of the intensive work, labor, and creativity it takes to implement innovative tools and techniques that push forward the vision of a global classroom and transform students into active global citizens. Unfortunately, discussions on uneven access to technology are tangential. Let’s keep in mind that advances in digital technology often exacerbate inequality and expose disparities and unequal opportunities in our education system. Despite efforts of public humanities within universities and the desire to foster engaged scholarship, existing systems and structures deter faculty and students from engagement with community.[5]

The final part of this volume, part 4, “Citizen-Artist and Teaching as Activism,” comprises four chapters that centralize reading and writing as effective skills to enact global citizenship and build more inclusive and caring communities. Service learning, civic engagement, and experiential learning are presented as generative educational approaches and “consciousness raising” practices to address immigration as a global public concern. These chapters are self-reflexive (authors reflect on their teaching and interaction with students’ responses to Danticat’s work); they also suggest lesson plans and practices that promote self-reflection and nuanced thinking. In chapter 12, the author discusses *The Dew Breaker* as a text that helps first-year students at Columbia College Chicago (a private art and media college in Chicago, Illinois) learn as “citizen artists.” The chapter features a lesson plan and syllabus that prioritize social responsibility and community building. In chapter 13, the idea of post-national imaginary and Danticat’s conception of “floating homeland” are advanced to address immigration, citizenship, structural inequality, and racial marginalization.
The author reflects on classroom discussions of *Create Dangerously* at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and what it means to teach as a black woman during the Trump era to students “who do not have experience reading with cultural considerations such as race, class, and gender in mind” (p. 283). Here I am reminded of the impact of far-right extremism on academic life and livelihood.

In chapter 14, the same text is used in an introductory writing composition course to inspire students to teach and write “environmental activism pieces” (p. 319). The author considers feminist pedagogy and feminist ethics of care to combat “a culture of disregard in the West” (p. 313). Chapter 15 returns to IRSC’s Big Read focus on *Brother, I’m Dying*. Here, the question of how to teach in light of fake news and misinformation is raised. The author’s pedagogical approach involves reading Haiti and Haitian culture in ways that challenge practices and perceptions about the nation and its diasporic communities. The connection between Danticat’s work and that of Zora Neale Hurston is wonderfully made to consider the importance of developing “periphery thinking” to examine the experiences of marginalized communities more broadly, and Florida’s Treasure Coast region more specifically. Critical thinking is emphasized as a necessary tool for teaching empathy and solidarity in and beyond the classroom.

The challenges instructors have had to face since *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Edwidge Danticat* was published are tremendous. It is not hyperbole to state that the world changed in 2020. So did higher education. When the COVID-19 virus was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and began to spread globally, classrooms transitioned to online teaching quickly thanks to twenty-first-century technological tools. This abrupt transition came at a price. I remember the intensive labor it took to learn those tools and teach against the backdrop of heightened police brutality. The killing of George Floyd by the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020, shook the world, sparked massive protests, and reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter movement. I remember increasing racial tensions as attacks against Asian Americans spiked after the pandemic began. I remember the emotional strength it took to teach while working through individual and collective grief over the loss of loved ones. What ultimately became a global pandemic exposed pervasive social inequities and attention to the ways in which people of color, immigrant communities, and other marginalized groups were disproportionately affected by the virus because of unequal access to health care and long-standing economic racial inequality. It is impossible to constructively teach Danticat’s writings without an understanding of these realities through an intersectional lens. I believe that those of us who teach Danticat’s work are doing so to get our students to reflect on the dangers of racism, classism, misogyny, and xenophobia. It is the reason why I include Danticat’s work in my own classes on Haiti, the African diaspora, global culture, migration, and Caribbean literature.

In a 2016 interview with *WordMag*, novelist and author Toni Morrison stated, “Books are a form of political action. Books are knowledge. Books are reflection. Books change your mind.”[6] Reading books and teaching books matters. Indeed, they save lives. This idea is echoed in Danticat’s *Create Dangerously*. Since *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Edwidge Danticat* has been published, the idea of banned books has gained new relevance. In the United States, according to the American Library Association, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* was one of the ten most challenged books in 2021. *Gender Queer*, Maia Kababe’s debut graphic memoir about coming out as nonbinary, was the most challenged book.[7] The conservative push to remove titles from schools and libraries is striking, but it also reinforces the importance of literature, the power of critical self-reflection, and the need to invest in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary humanistic approaches as well as the teachers, professors, and scholars whose work embodies and promotes
the very democratic principles currently at risk. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Edwidge Danticat* is a must-read and a valuable resource for educators, scholars, and researchers who teach Danticat's writings specifically and literatures of migration more broadly. It is a testament to the ways literary texts engender critical thinking and the skills students need to become global citizens and imagine just and inclusive futures.

Notes


[3]. See, for example, the work of Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Michel Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, and Vèvè Clark.


[7]. For more information, check out ALA’s Banned and Challenged Books website: [https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10](https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10).