

It is such a tremendous honor to be able to introduce Edwidge Danticat this evening, one of the most gifted, prolific, and sensitive writers of our times. She is an artist of great national and international renown—you may already know of some of her many honors, which include a MacArthur Genius Grant, a National Book Critics Circle Award, the St. Louis Literary Prize, and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

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For me, as a Caribbean person, and as a person who works in the field of Caribbean literature, it is particularly moving & exciting to be here tonight: Edwidge has been a literary hero of mine since I was a much younger person. And her work as an artist, a brilliant thinker, and a deeply engaged activist-worker in Haitian, Caribbean, and black diaspora cultures, has long been an inspiration. It's a pleasure to have her at Berkeley, and I offer my deepest respects to her and her work.

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Born in Haiti, arrived in NYC when she was still young, Edwidge's literary consciousness and her political awareness, embody the rich and lively *mélange* typical of Caribbean and black diaspora people. Palpable influences range from the kind strictures of her Protestant uncle, to the swirl of oral story-telling traditions, to the nimble back-and-forth of Haitian *Kreyòl* and the French and English languages, and the deep traditions of art, politics, and spirituality of Haiti.

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Vivid, too, is the sense of a writer's imaginative and intellectual worlds having been shaped by the vibrant, heady, and also sometimes brittle worlds of Brooklyn—and of Manhattan, where Edwidge studied French literature at Barnard. And as the books went on, the impact of living in Miami has also been increasingly clear. Miami: where deep communal ties of migrancy, voices shaped from separate island nations, blending and remaking themselves in exile, produce a vivid, woven tonality on her page.

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Publishing the deeply impactful novel *Breath Eyes Memory* when she was still only in her early 20s, Edwidge has since kept up a vibrant pace of publication across multiple genres—novels and story collections; non-fiction and travelogue; books for young readers; edited anthologies.

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She has also directly intervened in political trouble as she has needed to in order to serve the ethical purposes of her work. I'm thinking here of the stunning nonfiction text *Brother, I'm Dying*, which weds a clear-sighted analysis of the failures of US immigration policy to the profoundly personal story of her uncle's life and work—up to his harrowing and unjust detention and death whilst crossing the Miami border into the United States from Haiti. *Brother, I'm Dying* presents a particularly vivid example of Edwidge's ethical clarity, and her social engagement, and it is to me a signal work of contemporary non-fiction. Her rendering of these enraging and tragic circumstances in her family's life was an

exercise in not looking away. In crafting lines from which the reader could never tear her eyes away. And in so doing, Edwidge demonstrated the role of the artist—*her* deeply accountable role as an artist—in making sure there is a testimony; in making sure that we know.

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One of the marvels of Edwidge's technique, especially on display in her short fiction, is a balancing of great subtlety with that clarity I have just described. She is also really interested in playing with form, breaking open genre. Her book *The Art of Death*, after all, was part of a series about the craft of writing. Yet, Edwidge used the occasion to reflect on some of death's remainders—on the deep interiority of young girls, the surprising forms that grief can take, and the efficacies of bearing witness.

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And one other example: *The Dew Breaker's* novel-across-stories coheres a narrative of post-authoritarian Haiti that feels like a metaphor for a traumatized landscape: fractured, yet connected, deep grooves inscribed into the land, into which shattered indentations, over time, grow new forms of life. Shifting from one consciousness to the other, from experiences of violence inflicted or violence endured, from a diasporic experience of silenced, invisible wounding to a Haitian experience of belated blessing. The book enacts what Edwidge's work nudges us toward understanding: that our fates are connected; that across even vast chasms of difference and violent experiences of betrayal, quiet streams of shared consequence murmur.

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Edwidge's writing attends to that murmur, and it produces those streams. Ethically rigorous, politically clear-minded, and yet deeply attuned to the finest experiences of interiority, her work manifests great beauty and empathy in service of justice.

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As a graduate student I had the pleasure of attending Edwidge's public lectures, later published in book form as *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. I was moved and provoked then by her attentiveness to the necessity and precarity of political art—the way that art can become political in moments of extremity; how that extremity can be forced upon the artist; the extraordinary courage of a lineage of artists she pointed to who produce work under conditions of great personal risk. Undoubtedly, Edwidge herself possesses that courage. Her work and her example are bracing and sustaining as we move through exceedingly difficult times.

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It is an honor to be led by her example, and I'm so pleased that she is here with us. Please join me in welcoming Edwidge Danticat.