Modern American History (2019), **2**, 71–75
doi:10.1017/mah.2018.32

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

FORUM: NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

Immigrant and Black in Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*

Jana K. Lipman

The history of Americans' treatment of newcomers has proven especially fraught in the case of black immigrants who remain categorized as part of black America, a community that, from Frederick Douglass to Black Lives Matter, has consistently had to fight for the rights and recognition of U.S. citizenship.[1] Unlike Latinx and Asian migrants, black immigrants may more readily "look" American, and yet they look like black Americans, with all the risks that incurs. What does acceptance mean for black immigrants? Does it mean acceptance as black Americans, and if so to what extent do they remain outside the parameters of full citizenship?[2]

When I think about these questions, I immediately turn to Edwidge Danticat's memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007).[3] Like many memoirs of migration, Danticat introduces us to her family divided between Haiti and the United States and her fraught journeys between the two. It is a memoir filled with ambivalence, controlled rage, trauma, and anticipation. On the one hand, Danticat herself represents the possibility of inclusion for new immigrants in the United States. She is the author of multiple novels, including the Oprah Book Club selection *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and she received a McArthur Genius grant in 2009. She is among the most visible Haitian Americans in the United States. On the other hand, her memoir traces her father's fatal diagnosis of pulmonary fibrosis and her uncle's senseless and cruel death in the Krome detention center outside Miami after fleeing political violence.

For the last several years, I have chosen to end my U.S. immigration survey classes with Danticat's memoir precisely because it illustrates the tension immigrants often find between acceptance and opposition in the modern United States. I also want my students to feel shock and horror at Joseph Dantica's brutal and seemingly unnecessary death. Dantica possessed a multiple entry visa into the United States, but when he arrived at the Miami airport, he uttered the word "asylum." The bureaucratic and punitive machinery began to crank, and he died in U.S. custody soon afterward. The book's tragedy rests in Danticat's powerlessness to save him. Each time I re-read the book preparing for class, I find myself in tears, and to be honest, I hope Danticat provokes an equally emotive reaction in my students. I want them to be moved.[4]

[1]Thank you to my colleague Chantalle Verna for pushing me to include this line of inquiry.

[2]On the increasingly well-developed literature on black immigrants coming to the United States, considering the relationship between black immigrants (Caribbean and African) and African American and competing notions of race, class, and national identity, see, for example, Alex Stepick, III, "The Refugees Nobody Wants: Haitians in Miami," in *Miami Now! Immigration, Ethnicity, and Social Change*, eds. Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick III (Gainesville, FL, 1992); Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, III, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley, CA, 1993); Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Cindy Hahamovitch, *No Man's Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton, NJ, 2013); Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean Immigrants, 1860–1965* (Urbana, IL, 1993); Marilyn Halter and Violet Showers Johnson, *African and American: West Africans in Post–Civil Rights America* (New York, 2014).

[3]Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying* (New York, 2007).

[4]I've written about this briefly in the OAH blogpost, *Process: A Blog for American History*, Feb. 16, 2017, http://www.processhistory.org/immigration-executive-order-panel/ (accessed Jan. 10, 2018).

Instead, the first time I taught *Brother, I'm Dying* in a Caribbean history class more than ten years ago, it was my turn to be surprised. In their final essays, at least one or two students argued Danticat's memoir demonstrated that a new immigrant could be anything she wanted to be in the United States. I couldn't understand how anyone could read *Brother, I'm Dying* with such optimism. In my mind, the book was manifest proof of the opposite; even the most famous, well-connected Haitian American could not rescue her uncle from humiliation, detention, and death at the hands of the state. Was it possible to read this book and not see the pain and grim realities of immigration to the United States? Was the power of American exceptionalism that strong? Perhaps.

In retrospect I think I was too quick to reject my students' papers out of hand. Danticat's relationship to the United States does in fact have multiple dimensions. After all, she joined her family in Brooklyn and established her family in Miami. On this level, it is a story of successful immigration, and arguably inclusion. When she returns to Haiti in the 1990s, she is a U.S. citizen, as well as an accomplished teacher and filmmaker. Regarding Edit from "In *Brother, I'm Dying*" to "Regarding *Brother, I'm Dying*" OK? *Brother, I'm Dying*, the Canadian literary scholar Veronica Austen writes, "the United States is neither all good nor all bad … the United States is both savior and killer; it is a place that represents family reunion and the cause for family separation."[5]

Ambivalence about acceptance and the United States pervades the book. Danticat recalls the bureaucratic immigration process she faced as a young girl in Haiti, one which barely saw her as human. This is not a joyous or romantic coming-to-America story. A nameless consular official in Port au Prince takes on mythic proportions, "the focus of so many thoughts and prayers, le consul," having the power to decide who could and could not enter the United States. She and her brother undergo interviews, wait for medical clearance, and ultimately gain visas to join their family in New York. Danticat recalls the consul's parting words: "'You're both approved,' he said in what must have been official singsong. 'You're now free to be with your parents. For better or for worse.'" Danticat rejects the consul's benediction and condescension. "'Pour le meilleur et pour le pire,' he'd said. Why? I wondered if he knew something we didn't. Besides, what could be worse than waiting most of our lives to spend five minutes with a person who would say something like that?"[6] Danticat's memory of this event highlights the coldness of American bureaucracy, the arbitrariness of visa decisions, the power imbalances that surround immigrants seeking admission, and her own very clear refusal to embrace an Emma Lazarus interpretation of her life story.[7]

Danticat's portrait of her father also demonstrates the distance between immigrant mythology and her family's struggles in Brooklyn. In fact, her father's boss denied him a day off to meet his children at the airport, and then fired him on the spot. After this, Danticat's father worked as a "gypsy" cab driver in outer Brooklyn where he sometimes faced abuse, violence, and discrimination from his customers. His occupation took on a metaphoric quality: "My father's cab is named for wanderers, drifters, nomads…. Unlike a yellow cab, a gypsy has no medallions or affiliations. It belongs entirely to the driver who roams the streets all day looking for fares."[8]

In interviews, Danticat expanded upon her complex sentiments about the United States. In the Caribbean Studies journal *Small Axe*, she explained, "After *Brother, I'm Dying* came out, people kept asking me, Are you angry with the United States? I am angry at the people who put my uncle through hell, not at the entire country. I see the writing of the book, the fact

[5]Veronica Austen, "Empathetic Engagement in Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*," *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 44, nos. 2_3 (Apr.–July 2013): 29–57.

[6]Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 104–5.

[7]Ibid., 145–6.

[8]Ibid., 120.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.32 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that I was able to tell my own story, as part of a process of encouraging change in the policies that allowed my uncle to die the way he did." She went on to connect the death of her uncle at Krome and the birth of her daughter in Miami, which changed the way she thought of herself as an immigrant and an American: "The birth of my children in the United States made me feel, if anything more American. Suddenly I have a lineage here. I have American children…. So it is more nuanced for me than it has ever been before, this issue of becoming American…."[9]

Danticat's musings also speak to her self-conscious role as an English language writer, an activist, and ultimately an American. Danticat situates herself in a long line of black activist writers, pushing at the boundaries of American and transnational identities. Her memoir, which includes long, evocative chapters about her family and life in Haiti and Brooklyn, illustrates her simultaneous connections to Haiti, the Caribbean, and the United States. Like for many migrants, her story is not a simple binary of acceptance or rejection, but rather a complex dance, weaving between multiple communities, barriers, and opportunities within the United States and outside it. Danticat's memoir gives voice to how these experiences can be even more acute for Haitians who face the challenges all migrants face as well as the cruel realities of American racism.

Brother, I'm Dying is just one, albeit dramatic, account of the long history of Haitian exclusion from the United States. In fact, many of the nation's current anti-immigrant policies, not least its detention and deportation strategies, are not post-9/11 phenomena, as often assumed, but rather practices originally refined by the U.S. government through programs that targeted Haitian migrants.[10]

It may seem obvious, but the U.S. government has never welcomed immigrants from Haiti, a black republic born of violence, plantation slavery, revolution, and anti-slavery uprisings. In the twentieth century, U.S.–Haitian relations have been marred by the U.S. occupation of the island from 1915 to 1934 and then by Cold War clientelism.[11] In the 1970s, thousands of Haitians left the island, either by plane or by boat.[12] During an era when the U.S. government admitted Cubans as anti-communist refugees, Haitians who feared for their safety under François Duvalier's repressive, U.S.-backed regime faced almost universal rejection of their asylum claims.[13] The U.S. immigration courts even initiated the "Haitian Program," hearing up to eighty Haitian asylum claims a day, rejecting them all out of hand, and scheduling deportations. This led to litigation from the Haitian Refugee Center and investigations by members

[9]Elvira Pulitano, "An Immigrant Artist at Work: A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat," *Small Axe* 15, no. 3 (Nov. 2011): 39–61.

[10]Carl Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World's Largest Immigration Detention System* (Gainesville, FL, 2018); Jenna Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland, CA, 2018); Jana K. Lipman, "'The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is the Water in Which It Is Cooked': The Caribbean Origins of the Krome Detention Center," *Radical History Review* no. 115 (Winter 2013): 115–41.

[11]Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001). For a compelling counterpoint on how Haiti's professional classes welcomed cosmopolitan relationships with the United States, see Chantalle F. Verna, *Haiti and the Uses of America: Post-U.S. Occupation Promises* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2017).

[12]Stepick, "The Refugees Nobody Wants," 57–60.

[13]On a legalistic note, Cubans also did not technically have "refugee" status but were preferentially admitted as parolees. Any Cuban who entered the United States was able to stay and normalize his or her status through the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act. With President Barack Obama's renewal of diplomatic relations with Cuba, he reversed this practice, and those without visas are no longer allowed to remain in the United States. For more detail, see Jeanne Batalova and Jie Zong, "Cuban Immigrants in the United States," Nov. 9, 2017, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-immigrants-united-states (accessed Jul. 12, 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.32 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the Congressional Black Caucus who believed Haitians faced particular discrimination as black migrants.[14]

The U.S. government continued to modernize its detention program at the expense of Haitians. In 1980, the Mariel Boatlift became a media circus, and Fidel Castro allowed more than 100,000 Cubans to leave by sea, tarnishing them all as mentally ill, homosexual *scoria*, or scum. Far less heralded, 10,000 Haitians came to Miami's shores during the same months, and collectively this group gained the legal status of "Cuban-Haitian entrants (status pending)." While for Cubans this designation was clearly a step down, falling far short of refugee status, for Haitians they had finally received the same standing as Cubans from April through October 1980. This brief opening, however, also saw the establishment of the Krome detention center, a place of increasing terror, documented travesty, and the antithesis of justice.[15] In 1981, Ronald Reagan also authorized the Coast Guard to interdict potential refugees at sea and return them to Haiti with the most cursory of reviews and in violation of the UNHCR protections against refoulement. Of the more than 24,000 Haitians interdicted at sea between 1981 and 1991, the U.S. government allowed only twenty-eight to petition for asylum in the United States.[16] Finally, in the 1990s, the U.S. government "solved" the problem of Haitian refugees by sending them to the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay (GTMO). Held outside the United States but under U.S. jurisdiction, Haitians protested their conditions, through legal challenges and political protests, but ultimately, the United States repatriated the majority back to Haiti. Notably, the U.S. government also defined GTMO as a legal no-man's land, arguing that Haitians did not have the full protection of the U.S. constitution on the base, an argument which would be recycled to more infamous end after September 11.[17] As a result, the U.S. government experimented with detention and deportation on Haitians decades well before 9/11 and the acceleration of immigration detention, mass incarceration, and private prisons in the early twenty-first century.

When Joseph Dantica, Edwidge Danticat's uncle, walked up to the immigration authorities at the Miami Airport and admitted he did not know how long he would stay in the United States, fatefully asking for "temporary" asylum, he walked into this history of bureaucracy, exclusion, and violence.[18] As such, *Brother, I'm Dying* presents a searing indictment of the nation's border regime and nebulous refugee policy, its exclusionary past and exclusionary present. Danticat's own impotence in the face of these events has always struck me as a powerful cautionary tale. Unlike most Haitian Americans, she was a celebrated author and a committed activist, and she had worked with and had access to the most prominent immigrants' rights lawyers in Miami. She was able to call them at home and muster the best legal team possible. But ultimately, it was not enough. Her fame, prizes, and status were not enough to leverage release for her ill uncle.

[14]Lipman, "'The Fish Trusts the Water"; A. Naomi Paik, *Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps Since World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016), 91–5; Cheryl Little, "United States Haitian Policy: A History of Discrimination," *New York Law School Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 273–76.

[15]For later reports, see Cheryl Little and Joan Friedland, "Krome's Invisible Prisoners: Cycles of Abuse and Neglect," Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, July 1996; Women's Committee for Refugee Women and Children, "Behind Locked Doors: Abuse of Refugee Women at the Krome Detention Center," October 2000, https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/rights/gbv/resources/272-behind-locked-doors-abuse-of-refugee-women-at-the-krome-detention-center (accessed Jul. 12, 2018); Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee and Physicians for Human Rights, "Hidden from View: Human Rights Conditions in the Krome Detention Center," April 1991, https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/uploads/krome_2.pdf (accessed Jul. 12, 2018). Also see Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons* (Berkeley, CA, 2004).

[16]Bill Frelick, "Haitians at Sea, Asylum Denied," *North American Congress on Latin America*, Sept. 25, 2007, https://nacla.org/article/haitians-sea-asylum-denied (accessed Jan. 9, 2018).

[17]Paik, *Rightlessness*; and A. Naomi Paik, "Carceral Quarantine at Guantánamo: Legacies of U.S. Imprisonment of Haitian Refugees, 1991–1994." *Radical History Review* no. 115 (Winter 2013): 142–68.

[18]Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*, 215.

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.32 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The question of race lingers uneasily over these events. In one of the most quoted lines in her memoir Danticat asks: "Was my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian? This is a question he probably asked himself. This is a question I still ask myself. Was he going to jail because he was black? If he were white, Cuban, anything other than Haitian, would he have been going to Krome?"[19] In this succinct question, Danticat recognizes that her uncle's skin color, and her own, set them apart, marked for exclusion and incarceration. The intensified imprisonment of undocumented migrants since the 1990s has proliferated alongside the rise of mass incarceration, which has most acutely affected black men. Even if black immigrants are accepted as Americans, then they are of course marked as black Americans, at risk for the same harassment, arbitrary brutality, and over-incarceration.

President Donald Trump answered Danticat's question in the most racist and vulgar fashion possible. Even in her horror in 2004, I don't think Danticat, or anyone else for that matter, could predict that a president of the United States would later refer to migrants from Haiti as coming from a "shithole" or "shithouse" country.[20] In crude and repulsive language, President Trump laid bare the grim realities of U.S. immigration policy. It was not imagined to include black immigrants, and particularly not Haitians.

Edwidge Danticat's and Joseph Dantica's stories emerge as both individual, in their success and horror, and illustrative of the tightrope all black immigrants must navigate in the United States, regardless of their class backgrounds or professional accomplishments, or whether they come from the English-speaking Caribbean, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, West Africa, or East Africa. For black immigrants, W. E. B. DuBois's classic formulation of double consciousness takes on new significance. The question of being black and being American resonates through their personal journeys of migration to the United States in ways that both reflect and deviate from the histories of African Americans. And there are no easy or straightforward answers. The United States's profound, historic distrust of black equality and immigration means that black immigrants like Danticat have to constantly challenge and re-assert the countless ways there are to be black and American in the United States.

Jana K. Lipman is an Associate Professor in the History Department at Tulane University. She is the author of *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (University of California Press, 2009). She also co-edited *Making the Empire Work: Labor and U.S. Imperialism* (NYU Press, 2015) and co-translated *Ship of Fate: A Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate by Tran Dinh Tru* (University of Hawaii Press, 2017). Her work has appeared in *American Quarterly*, *Immigrants and Minorities*, the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, the *Journal of Military History*, and *Radical History Review*. Lipman is currently writing a book on Vietnamese refugee camps in Southeast Asia between 1975 and 2005.

[19]Ibid., 220.

[20]Josh Dawsey, "Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants from Shithole Countries," *Washington Post*, Jan. 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.e1b0d646dc54 (accessed June 1, 2018); Aaron Blake, "The Trump 'Shithole Countries' Flap Takes an Even More Ridiculous Turn," *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/01/16/the-trump-shithole-countries-flap-takes-an-even-more-ridiculous-turn/?utm_term=.bc09ca539e06 (accessed June 1, 2018). Danticat herself responded to Trump's attack directly, and she spoke passionately about the potential dangers to Haitian children in the United States; see "'Completely Racist': Edwidge Danticat on Trump's 'Shithole Countries' Remark Targeting Africa, Haiti," *Democracy Now!*, Jan. 12, 2018, https://www.democracynow.org/2018/1/12/completely_racist_edwidge_danticat_on_trumps (accessed Apr. 13, 2018).

https://doi.org/10.1017/mah.2018.32 Published online by Cambridge University Press