

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

THE REALITIES OF LIFE AND LABOR

Parents and Children

BACKGROUND

For the teacher:

Interview with Edwidge Danticat on Democracy Now!

http://www.democracynow.org/2007/10/5/in_new_memoir_award_winning_haitian

Haiti: Facts and timeline: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1202857.stm

Essential Question: How are work and opportunity perceived by immigrants and their children?

Historical Question: How does immigration both open and close the doors to opportunity for different groups of immigrants?

II. Introductory activity

Journal writing:

- What do your parents want you to be when you grow up?
- What did your parents want to be when they were children?
- Or, what do you think they wanted to be when they were children?

These questions can lead to probing discussions even—or especially—among students in middle school.

Explain that today you will be looking at literature that portrays the relationship between parents and children of immigrants.

II. Background information: Mini-lesson

A. Have the students read about Edwidge Danticat's father in Document A.

- What was Mr. Danticat's profession in Haiti?
- What jobs did he have in New York?
- Mr. Danticat said that, "He decided never to work for anybody again." What do you think his options were?

B. Read aloud the excerpt from "Brother, I'm Dying" (p. 120 – 123).

The excerpt students should read begins on p. 120 with the sentence, "A few years ago, I discovered, then lost again a few lines . . ." and continues to the end of the chapter on p. 123

This is a stirring passage that is ideal for reading aloud as a listening selection.

Pause for questions and discussion.

- Notice the parallel between Mr. Danticat and his children: They both want to protect one another from worry.
- What are some of Mr. Danticat's "street adventures"?
- How does Mr. Danticat react to his misfortunes?

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Pause after the line in which Edwidge Danticat asks her father whether he ever wished he could have done a different job, and he replies “Sure.”

- What do you think his reaction will be to the question?
- Have you ever asked your parents a question like this?

Finish reading the chapter aloud. Before discussing the excerpts, have the students respond in their notebooks.

C. Extend by asking students to write about their own parents' jobs.

Consider comparing Edwidge Danticat's experience with Henry Park's in Chang-Rae Lee's novel “Native Speaker,” pp. 55–57. Ask students if they have seen these themes in other cultures.

The excerpt students should read begins on p. 55 with the sentence, “I remember when my father would come home from his vegetable stores late at night . . .” and ends at the page break on p. 57.

SOCIAL STUDIES AND HISTORY CONNECTIONS:

Profile of Haiti, with links to news and chronology:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1202772.stm

Robert Parry, “America's Historic Debt to Haiti,” *Consortium News*, 10 Feb 2006.

<http://www.consortiumnews.com/2006/020906.html>

Musician Wyclef Jean's organization dedicated to Haiti: <http://www.yele.org/>

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Introduction to excerpt from “Brother I’m Dying” by Edwidge Danticat
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) (pp. 120–123)

Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian immigrant to the United States and an acclaimed author. In her family memoir, “Brother I’m Dying,” Ms. Danticat writes of her extended family and her separation from her parents, who arrived in Brooklyn, New York, as undocumented immigrants. Danticat’s father left Haiti first in 1971, when she was two, arriving on a tourist visa. Two years later her mother followed him to Brooklyn, leaving Danticat and her brother with their Uncle Joseph and Aunt Denise.

Like other Haitian immigrants, Edwidge’s parents came to the United State because of the brutal dictatorship of the Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier regimes and the Tonton Macoutes, the murderous paramilitary of the Duvalier family. The dictatorship not only terrorized the population, but stifled economic growth and opportunity. Her father, Mira Danticat, had been trained as a tailor, but lost his job when cheap used clothes came to Haiti from the United States. He then started selling shoes, but when he learned of the possibility of immigrating to the United States, he left to find better opportunities to support his family.

He lost his job in a handbag factory in 1980 when, against his bosses’s orders, he left work early to pick up Edwidge and her brother at the airport when the family was finally reunited. It was at that moment “he decided never to work for anybody again.”

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Excerpt from “Native Speaker” by Chang-Rae Lee
(New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) p. 55–57.

In this novel, Chang-Rae Lee depicts Henry Park, a Korean immigrant whose father becomes a successful owner of fruit and vegetable stores in New York City, moving his family to the upscale suburb of Ardsley, New York.

Background Information

In 1965, the Immigration Act abolished the quota system that had restricted the numbers of Asians allowed to enter the United States. Large numbers of Koreans, including some from the North that have come via South Korea, have been immigrating ever since, putting Korea in the top five countries of origin of immigrants to the United States since 1975. The reasons for immigration are many, including the desire for increased freedom, especially for women, and the hope for better economic opportunities. In South Korea, which is roughly the size of Maine and has a population density second only to Bangladesh, there is an oversupply of college graduates including many engineers, nurses, and doctors. (Source: Mount St. Mary’s College Center for Cultural Fluency, <http://www.msmc.la.edu/ccf/LAC.Korean.html>)

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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES

1. Discussions in previous lessons emphasized the “push-pull” aspect of immigration — the “push” to leave one’s native country because of famine, oppression, danger or limited opportunities, and the “pull” of relatives who reside in another country, of employment opportunities, and of a better life for families. In many cases, immigrants came to America so their children would have a better life. Parents abandoned their own dreams in order to provide opportunities for their children. Locate an article, opinion piece, letter to the editor, advertisement or photograph in The New York Times that portrays a bond between a parent and child. Discuss these with your class.

2. In Chang-Rae Lee’s story of Henry Park, a Korean immigrant, Henry’s father, who was educated in Korea and became a fruit and vegetable seller in America, was ashamed of his work, but willing to sacrifice his own ambitions for the well-being of his child. Many community groups and other organizations support projects to help children succeed. They organize social or fundraising events to sponsor summer camps, tutoring or sports sessions, library programs, health clinics — all for the benefit of children. Select two articles in The New York Times that highlight programs for children. Make a poster illustrating one such effort and identify the group of children who will benefit from the activity. As an example, learn about the Fresh Air Fund at:

http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/f/fresh_air_fund/index.html