READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

“Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work”
Why can creation be dangerous for the immigrant artist? Why might Danticat feel that it is dangerous for herself?

On page 13, Danticat writes, “perhaps there are no writers in my family because they were too busy trying to find bread.” What is her meaning in this sentence? Why does this situation trouble her?

How can artists effectively memorialize the dead?

“Walk Straight”
What is the purpose of Tante Ilyana’s life?

Why did some people criticize Danticat for the content of her first novel? What was her response?

Why does Danticat avoid an honest goodbye with Tante Ilyana? Why does she regret it later?

“I Am Not a Journalist”

What is the “tenth department” (pg 49), and why does Danticat feel like she lives there?

Why does Jean Dominique refer to himself not as a journalist, but as an agronomist? (What is an agronomist?)

Why does Michèle eventually choose to leave Haiti? Do you think she made the right choice?

Do you think that Jean Dominique’s assassins were successful? Why or why not?

“Daughters of Memory”

Why did Danticat both resent and embrace reading in French? Why is her relationship to that language so complicated?

Consider Danticat’s statement on page 62: “our stories are the bastard children of everything that we have ever experienced and read.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
On page 65, Danticat asks: “But what happens when we cannot tell our own stories, when our memories have temporarily abandoned us?” How does this question relate to the immigrant artist in particular, and to all artists in general?

Why does Danticat choose to tell the story of fellow Haitian author Marie Vieux-Chauvet in this chapter? In what ways do you think Danticat might empathize with her? In what ways might Danticat feel differently?

“I Speak Out”

What shocks you about Alète’s story? How would you act in her place? How would you act in the place of her husband?

Alète is clearly worn out by the interview, but is also committed to speaking out more “if it helps Haiti.” What is the advantage of sharing her story? What might the personal cost be?

“The Other Side of the Water”

There’s strong evidence to suggest that Marius died of AIDS. Why doesn’t Danticat work to confirm this was the cause of his death? Why doesn’t she argue with family members who say it was something else?

Danticat writes that “the immigrant artist, like all other artists, is a leech and I needed to latch on” (95). Do you think she was right to tell this story, even with the names changed?

Why do you think Tante Zi won’t swim in the ocean? What changes her mind this one last time?

“Bicentennial”

What similarities are there between the independence revolutions of Haiti and the United States?

Why does the United States initially refuse to recognize Haiti as a nation? What is hypocritical about this?

Danticat writes that “had it been given a fair chance at its beginning, Haiti might have flourished and prospered” (100). What would the nation have needed for that fair chance?

Why would the embattled President Aristide use the words of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture before he was exiled? (101) Do you find his choice inspiring or manipulative?

“Another Country”

What does Danticat mean when she refers to a “country within a country” in the United States? Who populates this other country?

After Hurricane Katrina, why did people say things like that happen in Haiti or Africa, but “not here?” What did the aftermath of the hurricane reveal?
What are some of the injustices that exist for people living in this invisible country? Why don’t their struggles get more attention?

“Flying Home”

Where was Danticat on September 10th, 2001? How did this experience influence her understanding of the terrorist attacks on September 11th?

Danticat quote Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession” (124). What were some of the things that Michael Richards tried to show through his sculpture? What does Danticat herself try to show us about Richards by featuring him in this essay?

Why are humans both fascinated and terrified by planes and flight? If you have flown before, what has your own experience been like?

Do you worry about dying “too soon?” What would be the “right” time to die?

“Welcoming Ghosts”

What was Jean-Michel Basquiat’s relationship with Haiti? To what degree do you think he considered himself Haitian? Based on what you’ve read, to what degree do you consider him Haitian?

Basquiat states that “Our cultural memory follows us everywhere, wherever you live.” What does he mean by this? What is your cultural memory, and in what ways does it influence you?

Both Basquiat and Hyppolite died before reaching old age. Danticat wonders whether they had great work left to create, or if they had “fulfilled their missions.” Do you agree with her implication that artists have a mission? How does their work relate to their life?

“Acheiropoietos”

What inspired Daniel Morel to become a photographer? What subjects did he primarily focus on during his career?

Why did Morel document his own hospitalization and brain tumor so carefully? Why was he so “joyful” about this process?

Morel says that “when you make people pose for a photograph, you kill them” (145). What do you think he means by this? Do you agree?

What do you think is the purpose of photography? Do you think Morel would agree with your definition? Why or why not?
“Our Guernica”

How does Danticat deal with the earthquake’s aftermath while safe in the United States? How about when she visits Haiti?

Why are Jhon and Danticat so moved by the painting they see on the side of the tent? Jhon speaks of “Picasso and Guernica after the Spanish Civil War.” What is the importance of art in times of suffering or catastrophe?

The United States sends resources and aid works to Haiti, but they also block off the airport and patrol the coasts to prevent Haitians from leaving the island by sea. Danticat notes all this without explicitly stating her opinion. What do you think of the situation? What do you think her opinion is?

Danticat had several family members die in the earthquake. How does this influence her telling of the story? How does her report compare to someone who didn’t know any of the dead? How about somebody who wasn’t from Haiti?