

BLACK BEYOND BORDERS

AFRO-LATINX & AFRO-LATINO AMERICAN LITERATURE

Black Beyond Borders

Afro-Latinx & Afro-Latino American Literature

History of Black Writing

October 11, 2022

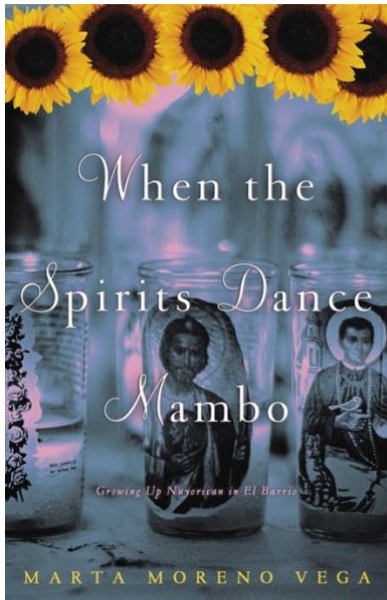
Introduction

The Black Literary Suite (BLS) is HBW's bi-annual program intended to educate the University of Kansas campus community on lesser-known figures in literature. This year's BLS highlights Afro-Latinx authors and scholars, and for this online exhibit, we have compiled a list of books from Afro-Latina/x women writers. While this exhibit features texts from different cultures within the Afro-Latinx and Afro-Latin American diaspora, a common thread across the works is the tradition of reclaiming historical and cultural narratives. The selections all exemplify the power of fiction to redefine the cultural narratives and positions of Afro-Latinx communities in their respective societies.

The following list consists of historical fiction, short story collections, autobiographical fiction, and speculative fiction from prominent and promising Afro-Latinx women writers. The authors represent nations and identities often ignored in studies of the Latinx/Latin American diaspora as well as the African diaspora: Afro-Puerto Ricans and Caribbeans living in New York, Afro-Haitians, Afro-Cubans, Afro-Mexicans in the United States, Afro-Dominicans, and Afro Brazilians. Moreover, the texts explore themes of revolution, femme freedom, and a sense of belonging as well as nonbelonging among Afro-Latinx women. As a result, these works foreground the voices of people at the intersection of multiple oppressions—racism, sexism, classism, violence, and xenophobia—within their communities. This list provides just a few examples of how Blackness is multifaceted and contains a multitude of experiences.



When the Spirits Dance Mambo



Published in 2004, *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* is a memoir describing the experience of Afro-Caribbean people living in New York City during the 1950s and 1960s. This rhythmic text takes its reader into the cultural and music scene of East Harlem with anecdotes about the influence of Santería, an Afro-diasporic religion originating in Cuba that syncretized Yoruba beliefs and customs with some elements of Catholicism. Vega utilizes modes of musical and religious expression to tell the story of her upbringing as well as a collective Afro-Caribbean Latinx experience in New York.

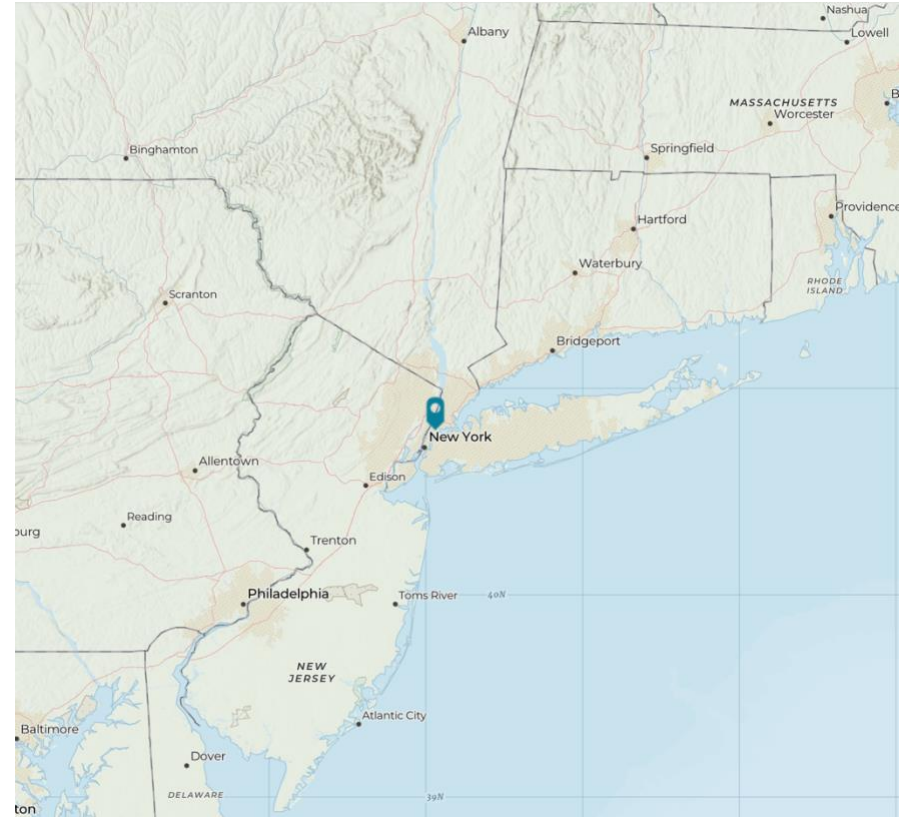
Words from the Author: In an interview about the Caribbean and African diaspora, Vega states, “I think the biggest challenge for people is to understand still that we are [the] result of 500 years of enslavement. And that the process of education has been one to erase us. And it can erase you intellectually and convince you that you don’t exist. So it doesn’t matter the color you are phenotypically, you don’t see yourself. And the challenge is for us to see ourselves as rooted in one experience.”

About the Author: Vega is an Afro-Puerto Rican writer and scholar who has dedicated her work at the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI) to connecting Afro-diasporic communities. Her research on Yoruba belief systems in the African diaspora include the spiritual memoir *The Altar of My Soul*, the study *Snapshot-Landmarking Community Cultural Arts Organizations Nationally: The Impact of Public Policy on Community Arts Funding*, and an anthology of essays and poems co-edited with Yvette Modestin and Marinieves Alba titled *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*.

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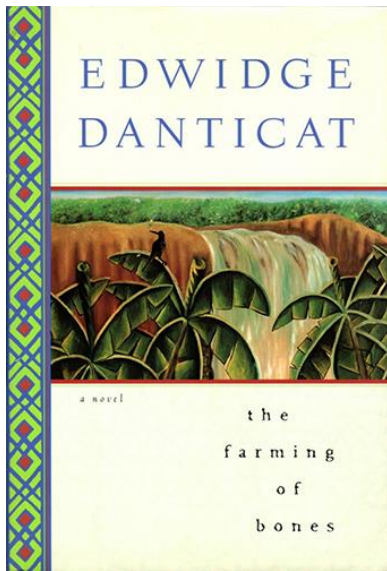
To read a 2018 interview with Vega, please follow the following link:

<https://africasacountry.com/2018/04/the-boundaries-of-how-we-think-of-the-global-african-diaspora>



Marta Moreno Vega

The Farming of Bones



Published in 1998, *The Farming of Bones* discusses the tense history between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The novel re-tells this history through the embodied trauma of the protagonist, Amabelle, who represents the Haitian population's perspective on these events for the reader rather than a history manipulated by the victors. Also, the centering of a Black woman in this narrative follows the tradition of Afro-Caribbean women's writing while reclaiming an ignored history of the Haitian residency in the Dominican Republic. Danticat reframes the narrative of the Parsley Massacre (Operación Perejil), a mass killing mandated by dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina targeting all ethnic Haitians within the Dominican border. The massacre resulted in the murder of approximately 30,000 people. *The Farming of the Bones* impresses upon readers the importance of sharing stories from those who have been subjugated.

Words from the Author: In the following quote from the novel, a group of Haitians share their stories about the horrors of the Trujillo regime. The narrator observes: "As they ate, people gathered in a group to talk. Taking turns, they exchanged tales quickly, the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words, for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell. One can hear it in the fervor of the declarations, the obscenities shouted when something could not be remembered fast enough, when a stutterer allowed another speaker to race into his own account without the stutterer having completed his" (209).

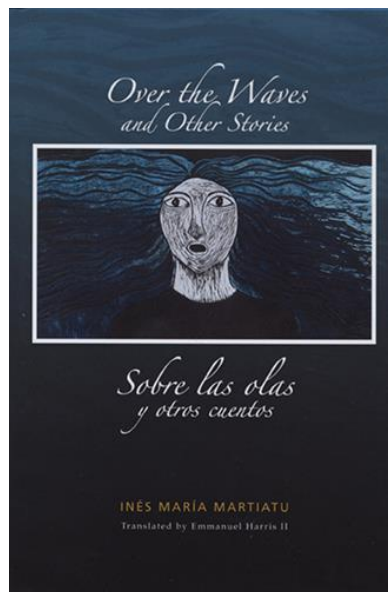
About the Author: Edwidge Danticat is an award-winning novelist and short story writer who started her career with the semi-autobiographical novel *Breath, Eyes and Memory* (1994). Born in Haiti, Danticat foregrounds the experiences of Haitians and Haitian Americans in her writing. She remains one of the most influential voices in the Afro-diasporic literary community, as she has edited several Haitian literary collections and cultural texts such as *The Butterfly's Way* (2001) and *Haiti Noir* (2011). She has also written the family memoir *Brother I'm Dying* as well as the short story collections *Krik? Krak* (1996), *The Dew Breaker* (2004), and, most recently, *Everything Inside* (2019).

To view an interview with Danticat, please follow the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6f46BbpabE>



Edwidge Danticat

Over the Waves and Other Stories

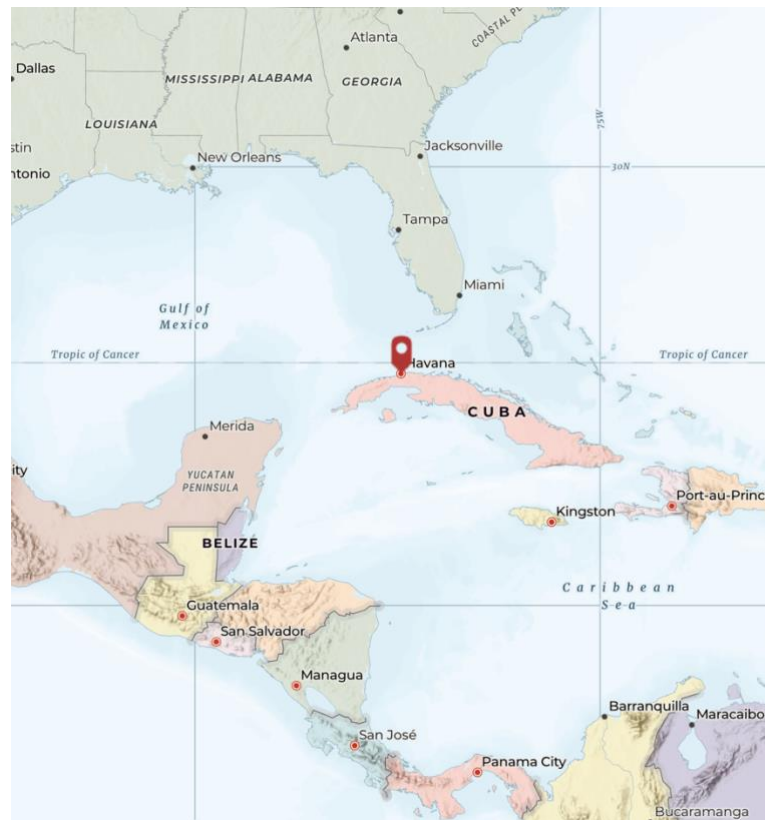


Over the Waves and Other Stories / Sobre Las Olas y Otros Cuentos was first published in Cuba in 2008. The collection debuted in the United States when Emmanuel Harris II translated it into English. In order to maintain the authentic feel of Martíatu's writing, the 2009 University of Chicago edition is a bilingual compilation of her stories, which provides more accessibility for readers on either side of the Spanish/English language barrier than what monolingual readers have when engaging other editions. *Over the Waves and Other Stories* displays the lives of Afro-Cuban identities from different walks of life (from performers and Catholic school nuns to revolutionaries). Additionally, Martíatu confronts Afro-Cubans' experiences with sexism, colorism, racism, and discrimination. Her stories invite readers into the intimate spaces of Afro-Cubanidad by discussing its unique art, music, and religious practices.

Words from the Author: In a scene from the short story "Time and Again," an Afro-Cuban artist, whose work draws on fragments of her imagination, confronts her identity in ways that humanize her in a world that works to do the opposite. "Reflected in the mirror would be a harsh face, or another young one, or an old one that she didn't recognize as her own, yet didn't reject as foreign. She would lean over the mirror, and all those faces and feelings crowded together in a way that made her head spin more and more. But the eyes, the eyes were always the same. Her eyes" (65).

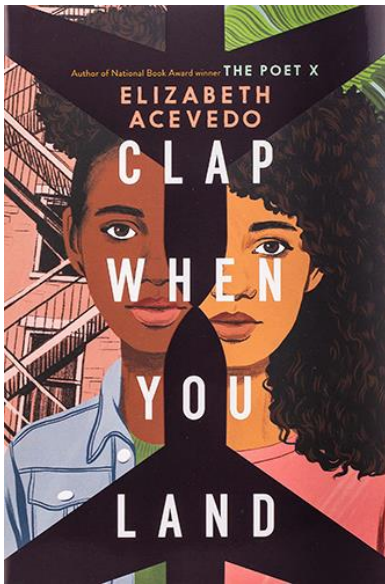
About the Author: Before her death in 2013, Inés María Martíatu was an AfroCubana scholar, author, activist, and theater critic. Although her stories, drama, essays, and theories are understudied in the English-speaking academy, her work is critically recognized in Spanish-language academic spaces. She was also known for her contributions to Black feminism, particularly in regard to Afro-Cuban femme persons and women. Martíatu contributed to defining Black feminist epistemologies with her co-edited 2011 book *AfroCubanas: History, Thought, and Cultural Practices (Creolizing the Canon)*, in which she and Daisy Rubiera Castillo highlight the history and breadth of Afro-Cuban feminism and make linkages to Black feminisms in the United States.

To view a Spanish-language video on Martíatu's work, please click this link here:
https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=671048766808485



Inés María Martíatu

Clap When You Land



Elizabeth Acevedo captures the complicated relationships between fathers and daughters in *Clap When You Land* (2020). The novel follows two Dominican sisters, Camino and Yahaira, who are geographically separated by their father's double life and secrets. In this way, Acevedo captures the detriment and disconnect that machismo (a behavior and/or practice that encourages male-identifying persons to be not only “manly” and self-reliant, but also violent and intolerant of anyone or thing that opposes this mindset) causes within the Latinx and Latino American diaspora. Acevedo conveys the daughters’ emotions due to the personal struggles they face by writing the dual-coming of age novel in poetic form. In addition, *Clap When You Land* reckons with unexpected death, forgiveness, sorrow, and grief to reveal how the messiness of loss and the exposure of family secrets can hurt families but also unite them.

Words from the Author: The following quote shows the complexities of machismo by maintaining the daughter’s adoring recollection of her father. She recounts, “The little kids would cheer, climb his back, so he would become a human surfboard too, I would say, “Eres es mi papi; he is mine all mine.” Papi learned to swim in water that wanted to kill him. The ocean can’t be so different; shouldn’t be any different. If any man could take a hard dive come up breathing, it should be the one who practiced for just that his entire life” (40).

About the Author: Elizabeth Acevedo is an award-winning poet and novelist of Afro-Dominican descent. A prolific and influential Young Adult fiction writer, Acevedo often infuses her poetry into her novels. She won the Boston Globe Horn Book Prize for Best Children’s Fiction and the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature in 2018 for her debut novel *The Poet X*, which is also a Carnegie Medal winner. Acevedo’s other publications include *Inheritance: A Visual Poem* (2022), *With the Fire On High* (2019) and the chapbook *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* (2016).

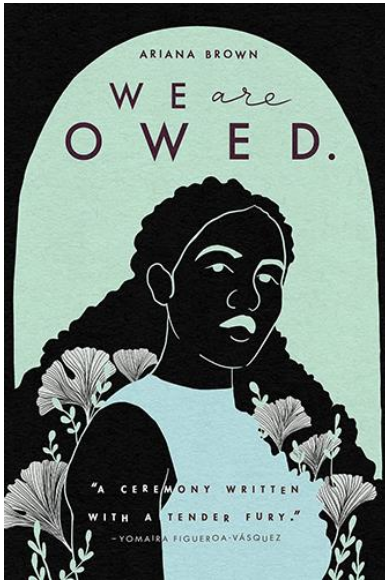
To listen to Acevedo read from *Clap When You Land*, please visit the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r9zwVipEhU0>



Elizabeth Acevedo

We are Owed



Ariana Brown's debut poetry collection explores a community of Afro-Mexicans and their relationships with Black American and Mexican American communities. In *We Are Owed* (2021), Brown responds to mestizaje culture, which prioritizes the mixture of European and Indigenous heritages, by highlighting the importance of Afro-Mexican experiences. The poems exemplify the ways diverse Black folks survive and thrive despite the anti-Black practices that exist in and around their communities. Thus, themes in Brown's collection broadly connect her poems to the African American women's writing tradition.

Words from the Author: In a 2020 interview, Brown offers an expansive definition of the African diaspora. She explains, "This is why I am interested in history... [the] histories of Black people in Mexican, Mexican American, and Latin

American spaces. I am learning that lineage is not always sacred (sometimes it is violent). I think a lot about relationality, though. I have a responsibility to Black people everywhere in [the] diaspora. One small thing I can do is share what I know about their historical presence in places where they are assumed to never have existed, like in Mexico (or Latin America in general) during the transatlantic slave trade."

About the Author: Ariana Brown is a queer Black Mexican American poet from the Southside of San Antonio, TX. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Sana Sana*, published by Game Over Books in 2020. Her work explores queer Black personhood in Mexican American spaces, Black relationality, girlhood, loneliness, and care. Brown holds a B.A. in Mexican American Studies and African Diaspora Studies from UT Austin, an M.F.A. in Poetry from the University of Pittsburgh, and an M.L.S. in Library and Information Science from the University of North Texas. She is a 2014 national collegiate poetry slam champion who recognizes that she owes much of her practice to Black performance communities led by Black women poets from the South. Writing, performing, and teaching poetry for over ten years, Brown's lesson plans for the classroom, Spanish translations of her poems, and other resources are available on her website at arianabrown.com.

To read a 2020 interview with Brown, please visit [The Adroit Journal](http://TheAdroitJournal.com).



Ariana Brown

To watch Brown read a poem, please visit this link at Youtube.com.

Tentacle



Rita Indiana's *Tentacle* (2018) follows the life of young maid, Acilde Figueroa, who discovers herself at the heart of a voodoo prophecy in which the survival of the planet is dependent on her. Indiana pushes the boundaries of gender, sex, and cisheteronormativity, a discourse based on the assumption that identifying with the sex one is assigned at birth and desiring the opposite sex are norms preferred and privileged over any other gender identity or sexual orientation. *Tentacle's* plot sends Acilde on a journey that requires her to transition into a man with the help of a sacred anemone. By shifting the main character's gender, Indiana questions gender fluidity and directs the reader to consider transgender protagonists. In addition to fostering conversations about gender and sex, the novel considers the effects of climate change as the protagonist's ultimate goal is to save the ocean and marine life.

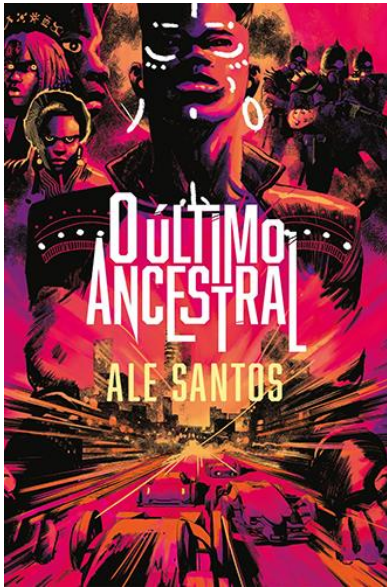
Words from the Author: In this tense opening scene from *Tentacle*, Indiana describes a near-future Dominican Republic after an environmental disaster that leaves the other side of the island quarantined. “Recognizing the virus in the black man, the security mechanism in the tower releases a lethal gas and simultaneously informs the neighbors, who will now avoid the building's entrance until the automatic collectors patrolling the streets and avenues pick up the body and disintegrate it. Acilde waits until the man stops moving to disconnect and returns to cleaning the window panes, encrusted on a daily basis with sticky soot” (1).

About the Author: Rita Indiana Hernández Sánchez is a Dominican writer, musician, performer, and visual artist. Named after her great-grandmother, she frequently omits her last name and publishes as Rita Indiana. A musical artist that interprets Afro-Caribbean rhythms and electric beats, Sanchez is also known as “La Montra,” a colloquial term for “the monster” or “the beast,” to her fans. She has produced two albums, published five novels, and written numerous poems, short stories, and newspaper columns. Her body of fiction weaves together a number of recurring themes related to identity formation in the postmodern Caribbean, such as the interplay between the local and the global, the representation of queer subjectivities, and critiques of class- and race-based discrimination. A Spanish-language interview with Indiana is available on [Youtube.com](#).



Rita Indiana

O Último Ancestral



O Último Ancestral is an urban fantasy that contains elements of Afrofuturism, a cultural, aesthetic, and political movement that centers narratives of Black people, heritage, and history. Published in 2021, the novel explores the technological future of African faith and culture as well as the history of Brazil in the Obabmo slum, which is located on the outskirts of the Nagast District. This region holds nearly the entire Black population exiled by the Cygens, an upper class of cyborg persons who have reinstated racial segregation. The protagonist, Elish, seeks a better life for himself and his sister when he discovers he carries the spirit of the Last Ancestor, a powerful entity capable of saving the Obabmos. Therefore in the novel, Santos reimagines Brazil's social and cultural history in a dystopian future by drawing parallels between the racial, socioeconomic, and spiritual tensions that currently exist in the nation. Not yet translated from Brazilian Portuguese, *O Último Ancestral* represents how Afro-Brazilians have similar experiences to other Afro-Latino American and Latinx communities across the diaspora.

Words from the Author: Speaking about his goal to rescue Afro-Brazilian history in his writing by adapting his Twitter threads into published novels, Ale Santos affirms, “I want to help, in some way, to rebuild the popular Brazilian stereotype on people of color, of Africa and all Africans in the diaspora, as well as exterminate the racist and Eurocentric imagination.”

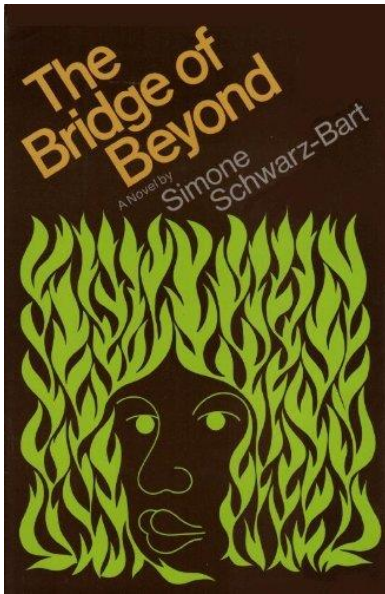
About the Author: Ale Santos is an Afro-Brazilian author, podcaster, game blogger, columnist, and instructor. He has won various awards for his blog writing on games. He was named the Afrofuturist Writer Finalist of Jabuti 2020, one of the 50 most creative by the Wired Festival and the winner of the Yes to Racial Equality 2020 cast. Santos believes that his love of writing and communication came from his love of fiction.

Use the following link to read the full interview “Ale Santos and the Rescue of Afro-Brazilian History”: <https://atlanticoonline.com/en/ale-santos-and-the-rescue-of-afro-brazilian-history/>



Ale Santos

The Bridge of Beyond



This historical fiction was published in 1972 in French and then translated to English in 1974 by Barbara Bray. In *The Bridge of Beyond*, Simone Schwarz-Bart recollects the ancestry and life of Telumee, an Afro-Guadeloupan woman who struggles with domestic abuse, the remnants of slavery, and confining gender roles in the novel's nineteenth-century setting. Schwarz-Bart describes Telumee as an homage to a woman she knew as a child in Goyave that she remembered as a unique figure in her memory even though the woman did something as simple as selling peanuts. Comparably, despite her family's humble conditions in the novel, Telumee's grandmother, Toussine, is constantly referred to by her nickname "Queen without a name" or "Reine sans nom," which represents how irreplaceable she is in Telumee's life as well as that of the village. Telumee's life is mired with tragedy, but the novel provides an almost fantastical worldliness in spite of its gritty realism that encourages readers to

empathize with Telumee, her female lineage, and the unsung woman in Schwarz-Bart's childhood. Ultimately, the novel is about being human.

Words from the Author: Typically, translations are viewed as separate works from the original, as they often do not just convert words in different languages, but also interpret their meaning while expanding the novel's audience. In the context of *The Bridge of Beyond*, Bray's English translation captures the poetic texture of Schwarz-Bart's writing as well as the Afro-Guadeloupan culture Schwarz-Bart highlights. In this quote, Telumee narrates spiritual practices that resonate with African American and African diasporic rituals, "And if we Negroes at the back of beyond honor our dead for nine days, it's so that the soul of the deceased should not be buried in any way, so that it can detach itself gradually from its piece of earth, its chair, its favorite tree, and the faces of its friends, before going to contemplate the hidden side of the sun" (178).

About the Author: Simone Schwarz-Bart has contributed many works to the Afro-Caribbean literary tradition, such as *In Praise of Black Women* and *Between Two Worlds*. She also inspired her husband, André Schwarz-Bart, to write the Afro-Caribbean fiction *The Mulatto Solitude* despite his being of Polish-Jewish heritage. Simone Schwarz-Bart has won notable awards such as the Grand prix des lectrices de Elle in 1973, which Elle magazine



awards for the best imaginative prose work of the year; Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres in 2006, which the French Ministry of Culture awards for significant contributions to the enrichment of French culture; and the Carbet de la Caraïbe et du Tout-Monde in 2008 for the best literary work about Caribbean or Créole culture.

To hear Schwarz-Bart speak about her writing, click this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM6rOMwA9IY>



Simone Schwarz-Bart