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Introduction: Appreciating Difference

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Introduction

Appreciating Difference

On my first trip to Haiti, I went to the Citadel fortress on a craggy mountaintop and to the Sans Souci castle, both built by Henri Christophe. The Citadel is remote and the castle in ruins, emblems of past glory when a man who was enslaved created difference and rose to the stature of a king with a court. In time, Christophe became afflicted in body. Rather than be subject to the mercy of others, he took his life and asked that his body be taken to his mountain retreat, where he would be safe from enemies and, in death, rest secure in the knowledge that he kept his vantage up to and beyond his end.

Haiti is a beautiful country, a virtual Eden, lush and vibrant; but it is troubled. Still, the people, no matter how poor, are proud. They love, even revere, their history, how their nation, half an island, defeated the colonizing French. At one time, in the nineteenth century, they were lords of the whole terrain, including their sister nation, the Dominican Republic. As siblings, the two are often locked in battle, beset by sibling rivalry deep into the bone. Retaliations against the Haitian influx in the more financially favored country are relentless. Their claim to fame is that, unlike any other nation in the hemisphere, they repelled outsider domination and gained sovereignty; but the price of victory was high. Still it is their birthright and testament to their distinction, if not in the eyes of the world, which tends to look at them askance. And trouble calls often at their door, with the regularity of clockwork.

So, often with reluctance, they leave the land of endless sun and much rain, where they were born. More and more, the destination

is America to the north, where they struggle and band together and continue the customs and foodways of home. Starting in 1915, Haiti was taken over by American forces. In the 1950s, after the soldiers left, a dictator who was trained as a doctor spilled blood on a regular basis, and those who could, fled. In the 1970s, the dictator's son took control and fed the material demands of a wife who may have been insatiable. In the 1990s, a priest became president, but he did not last. In 2010, the ground trembled and split, violently crumbling buildings and claiming lives.

After the earthquake, which brought thousands ostensibly to help, Haiti was harmed and helped. Missionaries and doctors and do-gooders of all kinds and shapes descended, and sometimes their pockets grew at a rate that surpassed the benefit of the impacted. And the more things changed, the more they stayed the same, with the rich getting rich and the poor impoverished. Now when I go to Haiti, a new moneyed class with funds to spend is everywhere, but few of them are Haitian.

Before the earthquake, Edwidge Danticat emerged as the poetic and political voice of a new, younger Haiti, with one foot back home and the other in the States. And she continues to write with force, empathy, and stunning clarity. Some of that younger generation, which Fabienne Doucet designates as having two components, those born in Haiti but achieving adulthood abroad and those with a parental link to Haiti, are double-voiced, if not triple-voiced, as well, speaking Kreyol, French, and English. And it is that linguistic rivalry that remains the rub. The battle still raging over which is preferable, Kreyol or French, is tantamount to: Will the real, true Haitian please stand? Doucet talks to a group of young Haitians in a Boston high school, some of whom privilege only Kreyol. Boston cannot claim the largest Haitian demographic of any American city, but it stands apart as the place of greatest political success for the Haitian community. Linda Dorcena Forry exemplifies the new Haitian thrust. In 2013, from her political perch as a Massachusetts state representative, she defied the odds by becoming the state senator from the traditional stronghold of Irish men in South Boston. Dorcena Forry and Danticat are Haitian women smashing the mold of yesterday. Which way to a bigger future? Will it be the road of appreciating difference or the road of stifling and limiting it?

Distrust and dissension rule the day in Haiti. Those who left and made good and send back their money are often resented. They are the deserters. They are the favored cousins. They are not the real Haitians. The true Haitians stayed. The true Haitians speak Kreyol, not French, the language of the oppressor. In the United States, there is a Little Haiti in Miami; there was one in Pittsburgh, referenced in the dramas of August Wilson, which testify to a Haitian presence prior to the time history books usually say, and which Doucet also references in this issue. Haitians fought in the American Revolution, and during and after their own revolution, they settled in the coastal cities up and down the East Coast, as well as in New Orleans. Now, primarily in Miami, in New York, in Boston, and in Chicago, the Haitian enclaves are growing. And many of the men drive taxis, from early to late every day. And when you ride in the backseat, they tell you how justly proud they are of their sons and daughters who are accountants and nurses and doctors and lawyers.

Other fathers in the African Diaspora, those that Zacharia Nchinda studies in Milwaukee, have also accommodated the changing realities current in their second, adopted countries, which usually adds up to giving new space to their wives and daughters. Ambition for self and for the next generation is a common denominator often present across the African Diaspora. Families in exile, emotional and territorial, are jockeying to find where they can get the ground on which to stand and prosper, that will not, symbolically or actually, shake and send their bodies to an early grave. And that path heading higher is one that all of us who are black and other in a place that privileges people who do not look like us and do not have our history are walking, although we may not always recognize that our road is the same and that the differences that divide us do not have to be insurmountable barriers. But then, jockeying for space and status is inevitable when people are trying to find where they belong, where they fit, and are intent on insisting that they have worth and value, and do not want to be overlooked.

War is a major reason for the new immigrants from East Africa, primarily the Somalis, who have settled in Boston, largely in Roxbury but also in Dorchester and Jamaica Plain. Establishing themselves in

this city, starting in the 1990s, they have since created several community organizations to serve their needs and ease their accommodation and adaptation to new terrain, but their younger generations are struggling, as Camacho, Dirshe, Hiray, and Farah suggest in their preliminary study of Massachusetts' growing Somalian community. Recently, I was walking in Roxbury's Dudley Street corridor when I saw a storefront that caught my eye. I entered. Inside, two older women sat on chairs talking to a man who was probably in his forties. A young woman wearing traditional Somali dress tended the counter. We began to talk, and I learned that she interrupted pursuit of a biology degree at UMass Boston in order to help out with a family crisis, but that she would be returning to classes soon. She smiled when she talked about an older sister who graduated from UMass Boston and a younger sister who is now attending Boston University. As is true in the Haitian and African Diasporic communities discussed in this issue of the *Trotter Review*, it seems that women are stepping forward into new business and political opportunities that might now have been theirs in the countries where they or their parents were born.

The Somalian expatriate community came to America voluntarily, and so did the Haitians. But many of the earlier exiles, those who were herded onto ships like cattle or other livestock, came to this country often in a physically active mode. That's what history reveals. Our ancestors danced on the ships to keep their bodies supple and strong. They danced out in the air and under the masts to vent the pain and loss that severance from everything they knew entailed, so that heading into the unknown without a map or compass was not overwhelming. Through dance, they mustered the strength and will to live and fight another day. They danced to celebrate and honor the propitious spirits of their forefathers and foremothers whose memory carried them through the hard and angry times. And through it all, their bones held their strength and their blood flowed. Keeping up their health mattered then, and it still does, given the epidemics and health challenges that continue to strike and threaten. As Chioma Nnaji and Nzinga Metger write in their health article arguing for an appreciation of difference across a spectrum of cultural and hereditary blackness, health remains an area of weakness and assault in the

African Diaspora. And dancing goes beyond entertainment. It can be antidote as well. Music and movement and rhythm are medicine.

Our backs, DeAma Battle tells us, kept the rhythm and the connection and the sense of family going. Then we added some swagger and sway for good measure. So even if the world didn't always bestow the credit and appreciation we were due, we had that dip in the step in the islands, in the cities, north and south, and on one continent after another that told one another and the world that we were more and better than we seemed. And so a people abducted into subservience and meant to eventually wither and die lived well beyond the date of their anticipated extinction because of the culture they created together. As Nnaji and Metzger write: "The traditions established by these Africans, and the adaptability and interconnectivity those traditions exhibited in the New World context, relayed core values, ideas about causality, methods of problem solving, and perspectives on the nature of life and of the divine. Of which, many African people shared, codified, and passed down into what is contemporarily referred to as African American culture. Within African American culture, one of those cultural holdovers can be seen in the extended nature of the African family that often includes grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others beyond the nuclear family. This custom also breaches the boundaries of blood, embracing non-blood kin and enfolding them into a lineage or family."

Our cousins and relatives are everywhere. Some are even now cruising down the highway, Mwalim Peters writes as he recalls a summer when he and his posse of Wampanoag relatives made money being Plimouth Plantation exhibits and agreed to stand up, in full dress, for a community that put them on stage without full disclosure of purpose. On the way from plantation to city, they eluded the snare of a waiting policeman, enjoying their leisure in an updated car with good music blaring, covering the distance together. Then one of them, a father, waits for the light to change. And a smile curls his lips as he sees a relic of yesterday standing on the corner. Once, we were all fodder for the wealth and reputation of others; but in this new day, buttressed by younger, stronger generations, we have a growing sense of what and who we have been and the roads our parents covered to

give us more than they had. So the world is ours for the remaking. And are we, the cousins, the relatives, the extended family, generating the steam needed to pull off the corner together, heading for tomorrow knowing more, seeing more, being more, and having more?

Are we a narrative nation, imagined and connected mentally, tied by a common history of disruption if not by contiguous geography? Lorick-Wilmot suggests that the stories we tell offer the basis of mutual understanding across distance and cultures and generations. In a reconfigured mental Diasporic cartography, where is our citadel, our castle (not to be confused with what Europeans named as slave castles of Africa)? The remains and monuments built in this hemisphere by iron will and the drive to change yesterday, uprooting it from the ground of inequality, still stand on the highest hill in northern Haiti, reminding us that the challenge legacy is long and tall but incomplete. And suggesting, through the lessons of history that undid the men (and women) who took part in that long-ago revolution, that the way forward cannot be through divide and conquer but with the rubric of unite and win, which requires appreciating difference in full measure.

—**Barbara Lewis, PhD**

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