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Haiti: A Bi-cultural Experience

Lecture by

Edwidge Danticat

HAITI: A BI-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE[1]

By Edwidge Danticat

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is my tremendous honor to be here this afternoon on this extremely special occasion to speak to you. First of all I would like to thank the Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank for extending this very gracious invitation to me. What a wonderful series this is! It is not often that banks and writers and artists enter into collaborations such as this. This organization deserves a tremendous amount of praise and encouragement along this wonderful path.

The world is getting smaller and it seems our needs are becoming greater—something which is all the more accentuated as this holiday season approaches and this being the final event of the year. It's extremely heartwarming to see an organization that attempts to join the cultural needs of our communities along with all the other valuable work that it does. I am happy and proud to commend you on these efforts.

On a more personal note, I would like to thank Anne Vena who has worked along with me through all the stages that led to this visit. Thank you for your kindness and patience. And finally I'd like to thank you all for coming. A special thanks to my countrymen and countrywomen who have come in support.

I am going to talk to you today a little bit about "Haiti: A Bi-cultural experience." Even as I prepare to do this, I hear in the back of my mind, the many ways that people began talks, conversations, chats, exchanges, dialogues like this when I was a child in Haiti. Of course the parties in question were never as "official," but it seems to me that there was a prelude, a way to begin a kind of dialogue like this that was mildly ceremonial.

My grandmother would say, if she were advising me on this matter, "Take a chair and settle in." Always she would kindly offer the reassurance that "this won't be long" and of course "you must just amuse yourself." Well, you already have a chair that you're settled in. You know this won't be too long because you know the schedule. So all I can say is you might amuse yourself.

"Haiti: A Bi-Cultural Experience." A bicultural experience of memory through the eyes of a curious child, one who as you can tell liked ceremonial moments and ceremonial things. One who loved rites and rituals

[1]The lecture "Haiti: A Bi-cultural Experience" was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank on December 7, 1995, as part of the IDB Cultural Center's Lecture Series.

and still now misses them. A curious child who grew up to be a curious woman, in other words, a writer. A bi-cultural experience through moments that I have observed, events played out in my life, sometimes like theater before my eyes. A bi-cultural experience through the eyes of a citizen, a citizen of many worlds, past and present. (I don't however call myself a citizen of the world because I have not seen all of it.) A bi-cultural experience, because I have spent most of my life between two places: Haiti and the United States. Bi-culturalism in fiction which in some ways I feel always looks at one place, any place, with two spirits, two minds anyway.

AHA

My choosing this topic is very much linked to an encounter I had a couple of months ago. As a writer, you quickly find out that part of the job of being a writer is going to bookstores. When you go to bookstores, you read from your book and then after the reading, people ask you to sign their copies for them. When you sign people's books, sometimes they already have something in mind that they want you to write in the book, so it never hurts to ask ahead of time what they want you to say. I was doing a reading in a bookstore in Miami, Florida, when a young Haitian man came up in the line with his book. I said, "How would you like me to sign this for you. Is there something special you would like me to write?"

This reminds me of a very funny scene from a wonderful film *Il Postino (The Postman)*, where the postman who delivers all of Pablo Neruda's letters to him on a small Italian island asks him to sign a book for him. Neruda signs a very standard greeting which breaks the postman's heart who had something more intimate in mind to impress his friends and the ladies.

So, I asked the young man, "How would you like me to sign?" He said, "Please write 'From One AHA to another.'" Before I proceeded to write this down, I stopped to ask him what he meant. What is AHA? From one AHA to another implies that I was one and he was one. What had I just become?

He said, "Well, AHA, spelled A-H-A, is an acronym for African-Haitian-American. That's what I am. That's what you are."

I had never heard that particular label applied to either me or any of my friends before, so of course I had tons of questions about this. Is it a playful title? Who started this?

He proceeded to tell me that this was a new hip label in the Miami area that was being given to Haitians, especially young and hip Haitians who had been in America for a while (more than ten years or so). It was a label that they had given to themselves, partly to combat all the other negative labels that young Haitians in the Miami area were bombarded with, among them "boat people, stinking Haitians, Frenchies" and so on and so forth.

The term AHA, African-Haitian-American, broken down had the following elements: African to acknowledge our roots, deep in the African continent and often very much manifested in our daily lives in Haiti; Haitian, because of course most of us were either born in Haiti or were first generation born of Haitian parents; and American, because we were from the Americas, living in the other "America," the United States of America, and some of us were United States citizens and wanted to in some way ac-

knowledge that this was also a great influential part of the totality of who we are. The complete label, the grouping of all the words, African-Haitian-American, also forged a bond with African-Americans living in the United States, linking us to them the way, he once felt, that the label Afro-Americans once united Afro-Caribbeans, Africans directly from Africa, and African-Americans under one umbrella of a title in these United States. It was a way of trying to introduce in some way all the things we felt we were at the moment.

So there in a tiny bookstore in Miami, I had discovered a new label, a more hip and more '90s way to call myself. That's always a very interesting thing to have happen to you in a bookstore.

1981

As I sat there signing other books, I kept thinking about what this young man had said. I couldn't help but flash back in my head to the time when I had just moved from Haiti to the United States in 1981.

To catch you up with my life before 1981, I was born in Haiti in 1969. In a somewhat typical migration pattern, typical for many people I know, my father left Haiti when I was two years old. When I was four, he sent for my mother, and my brother and I were raised for the next eight years by an aunt and uncle who were very kind and wonderful to us. While they were here, our parents had two U.S.-born sons in the household. So, we were two Haitian-born children, and two U.S.-born children, a bi-cultural household.

In 1981, I moved to the United States to be reunited with my parents. I came on a Friday night in the middle of March, 1981 not speaking a single word of English. My father enrolled me in junior high school on Monday morning in a bilingual class (I was lucky). Now the spring of 1981, aside from being the time when Brooklyn, New York and I discovered one another, was still a time of dictatorship in Haiti. Jean-Claude Duvalier (aka Baby Doc) was president. There was a large wave of boat people coming ashore in Miami, the first large wave of the 1980s. You would see dead bloated bodies washing up on Florida beaches, a common image on the six o'clock news. This was often followed by some type of report on AIDS, still a new news topic then too. Both items would keep us on the edge of our seats. The boat people because many of us, myself included, saw the possibility of my own fate being exchanged for those of the men and women who washed up naked and dead on the shores of Miami. My mother has a theory that all the Haitians are related in some way since the island is so small. So any of those bodies, any of those faces could have been one of our relatives. So we watched those white sheets that were thrown over those dark dead faces. And we watched those who survived the journey and walked away. We looked closely at their walk and their height and we looked for traces of ourselves in them.

My parents belonged to a Pentecostal church called Evangelical Crusade of Fishers of Men, which was very much involved with refugee work. So on Sunday afternoons after church, we would go and visit many of the refugees in detention at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We would go to talk and chat and pray, listen to their complaints and most importantly get the names of their relatives who they would like us to contact.

They all understandably had a fear of disappearing without a trace, of being lost to the world, of being forgotten.

So the faces on the news in the spring of 1981 seemed like ghosts that had followed me from Haiti to the United States. People who could have been me. So, I never understood why the children at school would shout the fate of these people at us as though it were a curse. "Boat people!" they mercilessly called us all the time.

As I said before, the spring of 1981 was also the time that AIDS was hitting the media in a very major way. It was still a new disease, new to the media it seemed, and there was a lot of speculation as to what the disease's origins were. All they seemed to know, all they seemed to be saying from the six o'clock news, always after the image of the refugees, was that there were only certain groups of people who got AIDS. Among those people were homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and Haitians.

So the labels we were given in my Brooklyn neighborhood in the spring of 1981 were not very hip or self-imposed. They were like lashes from a whip, a constant reminder of who we were, and how the children in school thought of us. None of us at that time considered ourselves anything but Haitian, even though there were many youngsters who denied it any chance they got. The denial was in some ways an even stronger statement of self-identification. When *thou dost protest too much*, others tend to suspect you. In the eyes of our young friends, no amount of chic clothes, or modern hairstyles could hide who we were.

I am reminded of a particular day in the spring of 1981. After many taunts and teasing and fights with groups of students who would continue to call us "Frenchies," and "Boat People," a group of my fellow students decided to use a stereotype as our protection.

We knew that along with the many conceptions or misconceptions that the other students had about us, one of them had to do with Haiti and *voudu*—what they called voodoo. So the Haitian students all agreed to carry red handkerchiefs and spread rumors that the red handkerchiefs had spells in them. Soon whenever we were called names or taunted, up would go the handkerchiefs with a mumbling of some kind of abracadabra and our enemies would flee.

Even those students who on other occasions would deny that they were Haitian participated in this wild scheme, reaffirming our solidarity. The children who were not Haitian, all they knew of Haiti was what the news media showed. All they knew was that Haiti was a country that people left in tiny boats and risked their lives across a deadly ocean to come to the United States, to be picked up by the Coast Guard and then either imprisoned or returned to their country. All they knew about Haiti was what the news said every night in those months of the spring of 1981, that a certain group of people had AIDS: among them homosexuals, hemophiliacs and Haitians.

Flash forward now fourteen years, where my time spent in Haiti was at a deficit to the time spent in the United States. And in a bookstore unexpectedly someone is giving me this label that was part playful, part revolutionary in the way he presented it to me. And for some reason, it made me glad. I was glad about what this young man was calling me and was calling himself, because as he said, it is "self-assigned" and self-assigned labels are always better than the ones other

people call us. It is something you can call a friend and a friend can call you. Yes. "Ahhhhhhhha," as the commercial used to say. It feels good at least to have the opportunity to pick what you are going to be called.

Days after this encounter in the bookstore, I would think over and over about this meeting. Perhaps this AHA thing was a North Miami phenomenon. Maybe this was something only this particular person and this group called each other. I have never heard anyone say the term since. However, that conversation left me with a deep sense of questioning about how we do label ourselves and who labels us. Is a person "bi-cultural" because this is something that people in their situation are said to be, or is it something that they come to terms with themselves? Can Caribbean people ever be uni-cultural in the first place, that the addition of another culture would make them bi-cultural?

I don't pretend to know answers to these questions. And I don't pretend to offer any definitive solution. For me these inquiries are part of the ongoing dialogue that I have with myself. Part of the continuing explorations I try to force upon myself.

A friend once told me the story of a Polish woman she knows. The story is often told to me with the preface: "You think you've got it tough." The Polish woman moved from Poland to France when she was a little girl. In France, she picked up enough French to get by but never really mastered the language. While in France, she never used Polish so she forgot most of it, so she didn't speak either French or Polish well. She moved to the United States where she never learned English really well either. So later when she had daughters in America, she and her daughters developed a kind of potpourri language and a series of gestures in order to communicate. So there was a woman with no language really. Is this woman bi-cultural? Is she tri-cultural? What do we consider this "culture?" Is it duality or no identity? Is it like the café-au-lait I drank so much of as a girl? Coffee and milk mixed together, where you blend two distinctly different things together to get a mix that is unlike any other two things separately, but can never split into these other pre-mixture entities again? Is that what it is? Or is it like oil and water which does not mix at all? Or is it like lemon and milk where one spoils the other? Does one completely cancel out the other? Duality or No Identity.

CREOLE AND MEMORY

The question is often posed to me—What do you consider yourself? Are you Haitian? Haitian-American? Caribbean? Afro-Caribbean? Afro-American? The question makes me think of a book written by three francophone Caribbean writers: Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant. In their book, *Éloge de la Créolité (In Praise of Creoleness)*, they say, as people of the Caribbean, we are neither "...Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians...We declare ourselves Creoles...aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history. For three centuries the islands and parts of continents affected by this phenomenon proved to be real forges of a new humanity, where languages, races and religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment...to reinvent life. Our Creoleness was therefore

born from this extraordinary *migan* (this milieu now only called Creole in language), wrongly and hastily reduced to its mere linguistic aspects..." The truth is I am all these things: Haitian, Haitian-American, a citizen of the Americas, of the Caribbean. Afro-Caribbean. Afro-American.

"Our history is a braid of histories," Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant tell us... "We had a taste of all kinds of languages, all kinds of idioms," creating what Derek Walcott calls a "fragmented memory." Our identities expand. The more places we go, the more it expands, the more we add to our own *Creolité*, the *Creoleness* of the book's translated title.

My grandmother never left her island but she was already more than bi-cultural. She had as many of us have, to quote Derek Walcott, "the Antillean geography" carved on her flesh. "It is there in Antillean geography, in the vegetation itself," Walcott tells us. "The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of the aborigines, Carib and Aruac, and Taino, bleed in the scarlet of the *immortelle* and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory..."

DIASPORA

In Haiti people like me are called "Diaspora," meaning we are a member of the diaspora—one who lives elsewhere but still belongs to the land and to the people. Those of us who live outside the country are part of the diaspora. People like me in the Haitian diaspora can belong to what is called "The Tenth Department."

Haiti has nine official geographic departments, that are actual physical entities. The tenth department is the diaspora of Haiti all over the world. It is not concrete land. It is not a specific state or place, but an idea and an ideal to which we can belong, where we can still be outside and still be part of the country. When you think about it, that's an enormous form of "inclusiveness" for those of us who live outside Haiti, in whatever country of the world we are now in.

I am often told by people who know Haiti that we of the Haitian diaspora maintain one of the strongest umbilical cords to the homeland that they have ever seen. People who live in the United States for twenty-five years or more sometimes go back and still want to return to Haiti and run for office.

I was once at the Haitian consulate office in Manhattan with my mother when a man in his sixties walked in with his U.S. passport held high above his head. He marched up to the secretary at the front desk and denounced his American citizenship so that he could run for parliament in Haiti.

My mother, who has maintained her Haitian citizenship after more than twenty years of living in the United States, always says, "If I can't go to Haiti, I might as well have my passport with the palm tree and the flag on it. At least I can look at it once in a while."

As the conversation regarding his citizenship progressed, the man in the Embassy repeated an image of René Depestre's (one of our greatest living novelists and poets), of nostalgia like a green-eyed stranger who wakes up in his bed every morning—

> For fifteen years or fifteen centuries
> I wake up each morning
> Unable to speak my mother tongue
> I miss the greeting of my *loa* gods
> The taste of dried cassava bread.

The scent of coffee in the morning air.
I wake up far from my roots
Far from my childhood
Far from my life.
My blood has already wept while
Crossing the sea
Now, the first face I kiss at dawn
Belongs to a kindhearted stranger
Who will one day grow blind
From forcing her green-eyed gaze
To count my lost treasures.

When I became a writer and started having debates with the characters in the stories I was writing, the characters would often have readjustment issues that touched on "bi-cultural life." The upside of a bi-cultural life, they would tell me, is that you are exposed to two or many realities. You have a broadening of experiences as one shadows the other. You have plantains with your Thanksgiving dinner. The proverbs of your language peek through the veil of the English you speak. You see the world with two eyes that do not always look in the same direction.

The downside, they would tell me, are the struggles between many worlds, different values, different means of survival. The characters in my stories often also struggle with their bi-culturalism. They walk the tightrope between dual identity and no identity. Does one place cancel the other one out? Can they both co-exist? Can we be part of the melting pot? What do we say when we are asked questions about how we call ourselves?

In the building where I used to live in the spring of 1981, after just moving from Haiti to the United States, we were all desperately trying to maintain a sense of Haiti while in the United States. The building had a very large population of Haitian families because we would draw one another in. If there was a vacant apartment, one person would tell another, and the other person would tell another until we had created this little haven of Haiti in most of the building. On holidays, the families in the building would exchange dinners and plates. Babysitting favors were taken for granted. If anyone was home, you could leave your children with them for a while, even adolescent children you did not trust to stay in the house as their parents had told them. If a child was seen misbehaving on the street, any of the people in the building were allowed to scold them, and the minors would listen, knowing the links and ties among the families, knowing how much the adults trusted each other.

When I was teased at school, I would dream of that building and I would run home to it every day as though it were a leap into the past, a leap into the familiar, a leap into the loving arms which understood me and knew how I functioned. The elders of that building were all our elders and they had the most vivid memories of everyone there. They knew of places in Haiti that even the new arrivals among us didn't know about, and they were respected for that. When they closed their eyes, they saw the past, deep into the past, like a well. All we saw, the people my age, was a future where we hoped one day we would fit in, where we hoped we would belong.

I remember there was an old lady in my building who always would say, "It is only my body that is here in America, but I am going to make the most of it." This was like a mantra for her. She came to terms with this, that all your emotions don't always have to fight one another. That it was okay

to be many things at once, natural to have belonged to many different places at the same time, to be happy and sad too. No place belongs to any of us in any permanent way anyway, as many of the Native Americans of this land and others believe. We are all temporary citizens of different worlds. This old lady was like an uncle I had who always believed that we would all be thrown out of Brooklyn and the United States one of these days, and would have to be ready for it. She was like a friend of mine from Trinidad who, except when she is in the house in Trinidad where she was born, calls every other place "This man's land." Not home, but "This man's land."

The old woman in my building, if something was happening on a special day and I couldn't be there, she would say, "*Map wè lombraj ou la*—I'll see your shadow there." She made me feel like I could be present with her somewhere even if my body wasn't there.

Last night when I spoke to an uncle in Haiti whose birthday is on Christmas, I told him I am so sorry I can't come, as I would so like to for his birthday or the elections, he told me he will look for my shadow there. This reassures me that my shadow is in places I can't be. And when I am there I step in its place.

As I close, my home in the traditional sense is not just one concrete place but many, many places. My adaption to migrating here makes me even more suited to take off and live elsewhere, if that is what I need to do. We all define our diaspora, our nostalgia, in a personal way. It is not one or two places, uni or bi-culturalism, but the mix, the café-au-lait, which we make of it. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, my first novel, one of the parts I found the most pleasure writing was about a young woman defining her idea of the world she belongs to. Like our citizens of the Tenth Department or the diaspora, it was not a place that she had a map to. It was a wider territory, wider than "the limits made by the map of an island" (Walcott) or the skyscrapers of a city landscape. It was even beyond the limitless sea or the sky that frames us. It was <u>her</u>—her body, herself.

It was "a place where women live near trees that growing in the wind sound like music." It was "fluttering lanterns in the hills, fireflies in the night, faces that loom over you…a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms, where women return like cardinal birds to look at their own faces in bodies of water…a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one." A place made of all the things that you've learned and learned to become, a place where the sea remembers everything and it remembers you, even those who have gone far away to have a taste of other things, if only to return over and over again, some of us in our dreams, some of us in person, some of us in fiction, some of us in memory. In fragmented or whole memory, where we know we see a shadow, and we wonder who it is who blesses us with their presence, who blesses us with their love this day. The visitors who come bring with them a whole package, a *djakout* full of memories, sometimes embracing and sometimes resenting the new culture all at once. While still grateful for the presence of shadows, for the gift and love of memory, and for times like this, to share them with others.

Thank you very much.

Edwidge Danticat

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Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti in 1969. She came to the United States when she was twelve and published her first writings in English two years later. She holds a degree in French Literature from Barnard College, and a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from Brown University. Her short stories have appeared in over 25 periodicals. She won the 1995 Pushcart Short Story Prize as well as fiction awards from *Essence, Seventeen* and the *Caribbean Writer*. Her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Soho Press, 1994) was selected for the Quality Paperback Book Club, and has been translated into seven languages. *Krik? Krak!* (Soho Press, 1995) is a Book-of-the-Month Club Alternate and won her the nomination for the 1995 National Book Award. Ms. Danticat lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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