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## Cultural Competency: A Student's Examination of Haiti

Heidi Dotson

University of Rhode Island, heidi\_dotson@my.uri.edu

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## Introduction

On January 12, 2010 I along with many others around the world as a 7.0 milliwatt earthquake brought Haiti to her knees. What did I know about this country or the people suffering on my television? Haiti is not far from U.S. shores. It was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. It was the first black independent republic. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with the highest infant mortality rate in the western hemisphere. But what did these numbers tell me about this country, or its people?

On October 21, 2010 the Center for Disease Control confirmed a cholera epidemic in Haiti. The disease had been brought into the country by United Nations troops. One year after the earthquake, only five percent of the rubble had been cleared away, and more than one million Haitians remained living in “temporary” tents. I had more questions. I wanted to know why so little had been done, and what had brought Haiti to such a standstill. I wanted to know the people’s story. What could I do to successfully help Haiti.

I knew that if anyone was to help Haiti, they must have answers to all of my questions, and more. They must truly understand the culture and history of Haiti. Aware that college students may be travelling to help Haiti in the near future, I decided to piece together a framework for them to understand the country in which they sought to work. In order to make an effective difference, these students needed cultural competency.

## Haitian History Research Findings

*As I learned about Haiti, I came to the realization that this country's story lay deeply embedded within its history. I decided that the best way to organize and present Haiti was through a timeline outlining its history.*

Christopher Columbus discovered the island of Hispaniola in 1492. The Spanish decimated the native population to near extinction. Eleven years later, the Spanish brought over the first Africans to work as slaves on plantations. Spain ceded the last third of Hispaniola to the French in 1697 with the Treaty of Ryswick. The French were much crueler masters. They insisted that their slaves convert to Catholicism, but their methods only embedded Voodoo into Catholicism. The slaves used Catholic saints to represent Voodoo spirits. This has led to a cultural phenomenon witnessed today: where nearly eighty percent of Haitians are Catholic, yet every Haiti believes in Voodoo, two seemingly contradictory beliefs. The French masters often had illegitimate children by their slaves. These children were granted special privileges and freedoms above the slaves. Other slaves were freed by their masters, and allowed privileges similar to those of the “mulattos”. The growth of these racially divided social classes led to violence and the beginnings of revolution. These roots of racism persist in Haitian culture today, and are used to determine an individual's social class, economic opportunities, education level, and political power. In 1751, the first slave rebellions took place in northern Saint- Domingue.

Every Haitian schoolchild can recite the names of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. These men are revered by Haitians for their brilliance, bravery, and foresight as their founding fathers. The Haitians are proud of their history as the first independent black republic. In 1804 Dessalines declared Haitian independence from France. Haiti has been called “America's unrecognized younger brother”. Toussaint

L'Ouverture's famous quote points to the very familiar notion of a liberty tree. "In overthrowing me they have only felled the tree of Negro liberty... It will shoot up again, for it is deeply rooted, and its roots are many." Thomas Jefferson was among many Americans who recognized the fundamental similarities between the United States and Haiti. "If something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murders of our own children." The paradox of slavery in the American south forced the United States to not recognize the first black republic. This cut off the profitable trade routes that had made Haitian agriculture an economic success. Following the Haitian revolution, France was nearly bankrupt, and forced to sell Louisiana at an extremely unfavorable rate. The United States purchased the entire Louisiana Territory for fifteen million dollars in 1803 under Thomas Jefferson's presidency.

US president Abraham Lincoln recognized Haiti as an independent nation in 1862, in the midst of the American Civil War. This reopened trade routes for the country, allowing for much needed economic stimulus. France demanded that Haiti repay a debt for "war damages" amounting to 150 million Francs. This was negotiated and reduced in 1838 to 60 million Francs to be paid over the course of thirty years. Haitian president Lysius Salomon repaid the debt to France in 1883. Following the 2010 earthquake, the international community urged France to repay the money to Haiti to aid in the rebuilding efforts. The French government responded by calling this demand "morally, economically, and legally unassailable".

Following a series of coup d'état creating economic crises, the United States occupied Haiti beginning in 1915. The US marines, under the direction of William B. Coperton, shut down the press, took charge of banks and customhouses, and forced compulsory labor on poor Haitians. American newspapers and leaders, such as W.E.B. DuBois brought this into the public light. Haitians and Americans alike found themselves questioning whether this was slavery or

“road building”. The US forces remained in charge for nineteen years, leaving in 1934, one year after the treaty to withdraw had been signed.

Political instability and poverty allowed for Francois Duvalier to step to power in 1957. In 1964, Francois amended the Haitian constitution making “Papa Doc” president for life. He used racism, and violence to oppress the majority of Haitians. “Papa Doc” is remembered for stating “Haitians have a destiny to suffer.” Under his reign, most Haitians did suffer, which had become a state of normalcy since the first days of independence. In 1970 Haiti witnessed a mass Diaspora, as powerful and political Haitians fled the country in exile, fearing for their own lives. Francois’s son Jean-Claude Duvalier stepped up to power as a nineteen year old in 1971. “Baby Doc” Duvalier took his father’s cruelty even further, transforming a childhood tale of a boogeyman into reality. The tale of the Tonton Macoute centers around a denim clad boogeyman who steals away unruly children in his Gunny sack to eat for breakfast. “Baby Doc” clad his thugs in Denim overalls. These Macoutes were known for stealing away unruly individuals, who were only seen again as corpses in the streets. Under this new cruelty, many Haitians began fleeing the country in exile yet again. The United States became aware of this during the early 1980s, and began legislation to help integrate the exiles into American culture. This led to a unique “Diaspora” population of Haitians living outside of Haiti. In 1985, “Baby Doc” made a constitutional amendment creating the position of Prime Minister. He fled into exile one year later. Again, the streets of Port-au-Prince were littered with corpses, however this time it were the Macoutes living in terror. “Baby Doc” Duvalier returned to Haiti in January 2011.

After four years of political instability, a Haitian priest well known for helping the poor was elected president in 1990. Jean-Bertrand Aristide began reforming Haitian politics, and was

quickly driven into exile. The United States reoccupied Haiti in 1994 under sanction by the United Nations. The US government reinstated Aristide as president, handed military control over to the United Nations, but remained in effective occupation. Aristide was reelected by popular vote in 2000. He was driven into exile again in 2004. While parting from his homeland for the very last time, he quoted Toussaint L'Ouverture, speaking of the "tree of Negro liberty," and accusing the US of deposing him. Despite the US attempting to delay him, Aristide returned to Haiti on March 18, 2011.

Haiti's recent history has been marked by natural disasters. In 2004, Hurricane Jeanne killed nearly 2,000 Haitians. The US was criticized for their lack of support following the disaster. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans' and much of the American Gulf Coast. When Americans witnessed the destruction, many media personnel remarked 'this is something that happens in the third world, in Haiti, not in the US'. 2008 brought four disasters in one month to Haiti, destroying nearly a quarter of the economy. The following year former US president Bill Clinton was named by the United Nations as the Special Envoy to Haiti to reinvigorate the country's economy. On January 12, 2010 a 7.0 milliwatt earthquake destroyed Haiti. Americans watched footage of people being pulled from the rubble of Port-au-Prince, and many remembered their own national tragedy of September 11, 2001. Haiti suffered another blow when the Center for Disease Control confirmed a Cholera epidemic on October 21, 2010. Americans raised billions of dollars for Haiti, however most of the money has yet to be dispersed. One year after the earthquake, five percent of the rubble has been cleaned up, and over one million Haitians are still living in "temporary" tent cities.

*Haiti has certainly had a history full of tribulations. The people take great pride in their foundation and hope for future reforms within their government. I was stunned by the significant*

*role that the United States has played within Haitian history. It seems as though the two countries are ideologically, historically, and economically tied. This history provided me with an extensive background to further explore Haiti.*

## Interview with Norly Germain

*I intended for this interview to clarify some of my research findings. I wanted to hear Norly's perspective about some of it, and use his point of view to guide further investigations. I knew that his own personal story would influence his point of view, but I did not expect his story to shock me.*

As a fourteen year old, Norly had a timeline of his life plans. He was to go to University, get married by his thirtieth birthday, and invest in coffee production in Haiti. His precociousness was noticed by a generous American woman, whom he affectionately calls his "American Mother". When this woman offered to help him financially, he suggested that she save her money to send him to University. Pleasantly surprised by his foresight, she agreed, and paid for his studies. Norly graduated from University in Haiti with a major in Industrial Engineering. A few years later he attended graduate school in France. He returned to Haiti, and decided to help kids himself. He set up a program with a few friends, and they all put aside 5% of their earnings to send local kids to school. He and his friends helped 30 kids receive an education in a few short years. By 2009, Norly was engaged to an educated woman working as a journalist. Two days before their wedding, the couple was kidnapped. They were able to escape and flee to the countryside. When they returned to the city and weren't able to find justice, they left the country. They have been out of Haiti ever since. Norly is now a proud father. He wishes to return to his country, but with a new baby, he doubts the safety of doing so. *I was amazed by his story, but he talked of all this as though it was all so normal. Everything that had happened to him was a step to where he is today. I can't imagine being in his shoes, longing to return to my*



*home, and knowing that doing so would put my own family at risk. But when I mentioned this, he responded that this was how Haiti worked.*

Norly described the culture of the family in Haiti. He pointed out that the mother is the head of each family. When he was a child he did not know much of his father. Recently, Norly had a chance to speak with his father, who could not recognize him after so many years. Men had multiple wives, and Norly is one of his father's 36 possible children. A woman is responsible for raising her own children, and providing their finances. Norly was raised by his grandmother, whilst his mother worked. As the oldest child grows, they must go to work to help pay for their siblings' education. Only once their brothers and sisters have finished school, is the oldest child allowed to attain an education. Norly feels indebted to his older sister for his education, and he says that she is not afraid to hold it over his head from time to time. When a Haitian is working, it is expected that they send money to their family members. It is seen as a family responsibility to help financially support your own as well as your spouse's parents and siblings. Now that most of Norly's family lives in France, he sends money to his wife's family and friends in Haiti every month. He says that this practice is not changing, despite the culture of the family changing. With western influences today, most men only have one wife. They are helping to financially support and raise their children. *The family culture of Haiti is not something that I've looked into yet. I had no idea that polygamy was a normal practice. It seems odd to me that a child could be a stranger from his or her own father. I can't help but admire the strength and courage of the Haitian mothers. It's interesting that the culture of the family is changing. I'd like to explore reasons and causes for this. I also thought it odd that it is quite natural to hardly know members of one's family, yet one is still expected to financially support them.*

I asked “How important is Voodoo to Haitian culture, and how does it balance with the strong Christian influences in Haiti”. Norly’s eyes brightened and he chuckled as he said “Haitians are 100% Voodoo believers”. He explained that although the Spanish introduced Christianity to their slaves, it was the French whom inadvertently turned the Christianity to Voodoo. The cruelty of the French masters sparked a strong culture of Voodoo to grow within the slave population. Norly said that legend has it when the French masters forced their slaves to pray to the Christian God and saints, the slaves simply renamed their Voodoo spirits and envisioned Christian images. This was the beginning of the unique religious culture of Haiti. A large percentage of Haitians today are Christian, but Voodoo culture has a strong hold on their beliefs. He said that no matter how educated or religious a Haitian is, they still hold Voodoo superstitions. Norly recalled his grandmother chastising him for talking to bad people or walking on unholy ground when he came down with a cold as a child. His own father was a Voodoo priest, and Norly wondered if he was the type of priest who used leaves to heal a person, or the type who stole one person’s life to give to another. *I had a difficult time understanding how Christianity and Voodoo could both be practiced by the same individual. Norly helped me see that Voodoo is less of a religion in Haiti. But rather it’s an integral piece of the cultural conscience. Voodoo has become the modern Haitian’s link to the past.*

I asked Norly about his thoughts regarding international aid today. He simply shook his head and said “How can you help Haiti without the help of Haitians”. He explained that Haitians mistrust international aid, as well as their own government. They have learned that they can only help and rely upon themselves. He said that those first few days after the earthquake in 2010 allowed Haitians to help Haiti for the first time in a very long time. When I mentioned NGOs he winced, and flatly stated “NGOs make the system weak”. The NGOs allow companies to bring

in foreign employees. Everyone has good intentions, but if Doctors without Borders and the Red Cross talked to Haitians they would see that the need isn't foreign doctors. Supplies and well trained nurses and midwives would achieve a far greater good than one American doctor visiting for a week. Norly has seen much more achieved by grassroots movements and local education which incorporate Haitians in the process than international money. *Norly's views seem to be congruent with my research findings. His distrust of foreign aid and hunger for Haitian involvement echoes what Haitian history reveals. Haiti has never truly had an opportunity to help itself on its own. If anything is to change, Haitians must be involved in rebuilding their country today.*

“What would you like to see change the most?” I asked. Norly answered me in one breath “education and healthcare”. He explained that Haitians need education to have a working democracy. Norly pointed out something his mother said regarding the litter in the streets of Port-au-Prince. She said that it never would have occurred during the good Duvalier days. He explained that Haitians have no social responsibility to know that littering is wrong. Littering is okay, kidnapping is not punished, and political corruption is allowed. The Haitian mentality needs to learn social responsibility and justice. To say that healthcare is lacking is an understatement. Women routinely carry a child to term and deliver a baby without ever visiting a doctor or clinic. This results in high infant mortality rates, and malnourished babies. Norly explained that Haitians don't trust western medicine. In fact, his grandmother would threaten to bring him to the doctor if he did not eat his vegetables. Pregnant women refuse to visit the doctor, because often times they are given medicines which force the woman to have an expensive Cesarean section. Doctors are not viewed as helpful or good. Haitian culture also inhibits healthcare. The first born child must be born within the family home. This often

prevents complications from being handled successfully. A father tells the midwife to save either the wife or the child. These practices are not argued or challenged, but simply accepted as tradition.

Norly sees these problems within Haitian society, but knows that they are not easily fixed. Again he points out that it would require Haitian involvement to change mentalities and cultural practices. He recognizes the barriers. Corruption, injustice, and the Haitian mentality are the immediately recognizable ones. But after a moment's hesitation, Norly turns to me and says "You don't have racism in this country, well not like the racism in Haiti, but that is the biggest problem we have. The society is divided into three classes: low class (poor), mid-class (mostly built-up of intellectual people) and upper class or economic class (mostly built up of mulattos and achieved people from the mid-class). There is a very serious racism and discrimination from either class toward another". He doesn't see it going away or changing any time soon. He says it has been engraved in the cultural consciousness along with Voodoo and tradition. It has been a major influence in politics. It influences where an individual lives, how much education they have, and even who they marry. Race is the class system of Haiti. *Norly's concerns reflect the major themes I've encountered in my research. I was surprised at how easily he talked about the barriers to improvement. I wanted to argue that America was filled with a different type of racism, that it was simple covert, and that my parents had watched the Birmingham marches on their televisions growing up. However, I realized that even Birmingham circa 1958 could not rival Port-au-Prince today.*

"How has Haiti's history influenced the national conscience" I asked. Norly smiled and assured me that Haitians are in fact very proud of their history. They recognize that their history has been difficult, but celebrate in their endurance and achievements. Haiti was the first free

black nation, and even helped the United States win their freedom from the English. They revere the individuals whom fought for their freedom, and cherish their unique culture. Haitians question what they paid France for global recognition. They are ashamed of their current politics, and series of dictators. Norly's smile fades and he states "We need new independence".

*I recognized a familiar theme in Norly's words. The Haitians are proud of their freedom and those whom fought for it. Despite all of the nation's ongoing political discord, Haitians hold onto their foundation. Haitians are remarkably proud to be Haitian. I did not expect this, yet it seems to be a resounding theme in all that Norly portrayed to me. This seems to be a key to helping Haitians today. Why would a proud people with a rich cultural heritage willingly submit to foreign powers again? In order to help Haitians, it seems that these foreign powers must recognize the pride and power of Haiti itself.*

## Interview with Nannette Canniff

*As I climbed out of my car, I exhaled slowly in an attempt to pace my heart, knowing that my eager eyes would still give me away. I had heard so much about this woman over the years of living with her granddaughter, whom had frequently spoke of her with casual admiration and astonishment. I was here to hear her stories, to utilize her experiences and wisdom in my own work. I climbed the stairs to her office, pausing to take in each photograph I passed: visibly impoverished children smiling brightly, beautiful landscapes dotted with small homes, and a determined looking woman smiling next to a tall thin priest. A woman with those same determined eyes came out to meet me. In a way she seemed much like my own grandmother, wearing a white sweater, butter-colored turtleneck, and large gold cross around her neck. I half expected her to chastise me for looking too thin while offering me tea and homemade cookies, as my grandmother would have. Her handshake was firm and her eyes welcoming, as I was reminded that this afternoon would be centered on topics not fit for tea cookies.*

Twenty-eight years ago, Nannette Canniff was a proud mother of ten, and a faithful Catholic strongly involved in her parish community. Hearing of Mother Teresa's work in Haiti, Nannette and her parish St. Boniface worked to raise funds for Mother Teresa's orphanage in Port au Prince. After raising a substantial amount of money, the group came to realize that in order to ensure that their hard earned dollars did not fall into the wrong hands; they would need to deliver it themselves. Nanette offered to travel to Haiti with the donations, but what she experienced left her hungry to do more. The St. Boniface parish in Quincy, Massachusetts continued to raise more and more money for Haiti. They were invited to visit a small catholic parish in rural Fond des Blancs, sixty – five miles from Port au Prince. Here the New England

parishioners were shocked by the generosity of the community. Locals with little food to feed their children shared their food and precious water with the visiting Americans. It was decided that from then on St. Boniface parish would help to support this community. When I asked Nannette for her personal story that led to her involvement in Haiti, she laughed and said “It was really all an accident. I could not have imagined it getting this far, but I saw a desperate need and had to help.”

Within a year 5,000 children under the age of five had been immunized, something we take for granted in the United States. Soon a small school was built to provide kindergarten, first and second grade education to these children. On one trip they brought a French nurse to Fond des Blancs, and people walked eight to ten hours from the surrounding areas to receive care. Many people were far too worn out and ill to leave, and so an overnight ward was set-up. The Americans now wanted to build a hospital in Fond des Blancs, but waited until the local priest had visited and spoken with each family about it. Each member of the community aided in the building of their hospital. Men crushed rock to be added to the cement mixture, and women poured the cement into the molds. Nannette paused in her story as a smile crept onto her face “It’s truly the people’s hospital. There’s no need to lock the building at night. No one steals from the hospital, because they know they are stealing from their own community.” Today people can graduate from high school in Fond des Blancs. Many of the children that were first vaccinated now work in the hospital. In 2000, an operating room was added to the hospital which can now perform cesarian sections and remove fibroid tumors. The majority of the staff in both the school and hospital are Haitians, although American, Canadian, and French teams visit throughout the year. The St. Boniface Haiti Foundation engages in health education throughout the community, providing: AIDS and sexual education, child weighing stations,

family nutrition programs, financial planning programs, and reading education for women. *It seems unthinkable that a simple parish fundraiser in Quincy Massachusetts could evolve into a rural Haitian community's proud achievements. The St. Boniface Haiti Foundation has successfully provided the people of Fond des Blancs with the small tools they needed to work for their own change and growth. Nannette modestly credits the people of Fond des Blancs with their deserved praise. I'd venture to say that the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation is a success, due to its incorporation of the local community.*

“What aspects of Haitian culture surprised you the most?” Nannette answers me with a story about a fourteen year old boy:

At 14, he weighed forty-six pounds, and had been badly burned. He lay in a hospital in Port-au-Prince, where the nuns simply cleaned him daily. Without skin grafts, he would die shortly, and the nuns asked Nannette to help him. “When we met I asked how he was feeling. He responded ‘I’m suffering with Jesus on the cross.’” Nannette flew him home to Boston. He lived with her and went to school, while he underwent twenty-two surgeries at Shriners Hospital, over the course of seven years. Never losing hope for a better life. Today he lives in Brockton, Massachusetts, runs a business and is a proud father.

She smiles, “HOPE is the virtue of the people. The Haitians are 75-80% catholic and 90% of the population attends church services regularly. They have a great faith, and this faith gives them remarkable hope. If you ask a woman ‘Have you eaten today?’ She will respond ‘Not today, but hopefully tomorrow.’ People with barely enough food for themselves will share with their neighbors.” Nannette admires the Haitian people for their faith and hope. She explains that she admired the young boy she took in, whom she now considers her son. *I did not expect such an answer. It is clear that Nannette truly understands the culture of Haiti, and holds its people in*



*the utmost respect. I shudder at the thought of what that young boy suffered, and yet I wonder where he found such strength. I guess I've never truly understood HOPE. It feels trivial to use that same word: I hope for my studying to pay off to ace an exam; but a fourteen year old boy HOPED that he would get another day to live.*

Nannette has two hopes for change in Haiti. First, she would like to see education for everyone. She explains that only 50% of Haitian children have an opportunity for education. Education is tuition based, and not all families can afford to send every child to school. She explains that the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation raises money to send local children to school, and this past year they sent 475 children to school for grades 1-8. She points to a trend seen at their own schools, a decline in the number of students enrolled in high school. Second, she would like to see an increase in reliable healthcare. She explains that occasionally Haitians have distrust in modern medicine. Some will choose to visit witch doctors rather than hospitals. These “Hougans” can cause more harm than good to the ill. In order to overcome this, the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation engaged the community of Fond des Blancs within their work, establishing a trust in the community. This trust led to more positive outcomes for the ill. *It seems like Nannette is making strides to see her hopes for change carried out within the Fond des Blancs community. She also acknowledges that change will not happen for Haiti unless the Haitians want it.*

I mentioned the 2010 earthquake. Nannette said “I was there.” She describes a scene of chaos as the hospital was evacuated quickly. But one woman, in the middle of labor remained within the building. Her voice drops as she tells of the complete silence that fell on the crowd laying together on the ground, listening to the woman’s wailing, and praying for her life. Thankfully the building stood along with all the other buildings in the compound, with little

damage, and the woman gave birth to a healthy baby at 11:00 pm. The small clinic ten miles away crumbled with no casualties. Nannette explains the fear that took most people weeks to recover from. Next, came the migration from the city. Families who could barely feed themselves took in homeless relatives from Port au Prince.

Amidst the chaos Nannette witnessed a unique social change. The hospital in Fond des Blancs received spinal cord injury patients from Port au Prince. These were the survivors of the rubble, who were pulled out alive, but paralyzed. With international doctors brought in to teach their staff, and donations for wheelchairs and a new bathroom, the hospital quickly established a new ward for these patients. Nannette explains that Haiti has never taken to the handicapped. Oftentimes, they were seen as being punished by God, and hidden from the public. The paralytics in Fond des Blancs became part of their community. They are taken to soccer games and other social events. With the rehab provided at the St. Boniface Hospital these patients are welcomed back into their homes, and able to live fairly independent lives.

Nannette does remark on the state of progress in Haiti since the earthquake. She comments on the Cholera epidemic, which was brought to Haiti by some UN soldiers, pointing to the tent cities as the problem for the speed with which it spread. She fears that the Haitians are becoming too comfortable with their new “temporary” tent lifestyle. The lack of a plan to clean up Port au Prince does not prove otherwise. She describes thousands of people living in tents along the medians of the highways and roads, walking across these major roads for water and food daily.

*Nannette has seen both good and bad come from the 2010 earthquake. But she most certainly agrees with the media that there is much to be done. I had no idea that the handicapped were so rejected by Haitian society. It is remarkable that it took such a drastic*

*disaster to change that. The idea of the Haitian people settling into their “tent life” seems especially heartbreaking.*

Nannette has strong feelings about international aid in Haiti. “I’ve seen many hospitals, schools, and other nonprofits fail.” She believes that incorporating the local community is key to success. She points out that international agencies did a great job raising billions of dollars for Haiti following the earthquake. However most of that money has yet to be sent to Haiti, because without the help of the Haitians, there is no way to ensure how it’s used. *I can see that Nannette’s experiences have taught her both the appropriate methods and inappropriate methods to complete her work.*

“How have you continuously and successfully impacted the community of Fond des Blancs,” I asked. Nannette responds simply, “Everything we do we do with the community. They tell us what they want. It’s a wonderful relationship”. Her methods begin with prayer, as they develop, organize, lead and secure funding for healthcare, education and community development. St. Boniface is trying to build a happy, healthy community. The St. Boniface Haiti Foundation has a donor base reaching up to 6,000 individuals in the Boston area. Five years ago, the organization was awarded a 1.7 million dollar United States government grant for AIDS education, testing, and medication distribution. Adult literacy, financial planning, family nutrition, and sexual education programs are some examples of how the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation reaches out to the 250,000 people living in the region surrounding Fond des Blancs. *I find it remarkable how over the course of 28 years, a small parish fundraiser has grown into a United States grant holding organization. I’d certainly point to Nannette’s methods as a true recipe for success.*

And of course Nannette has future plans. She'd like to improve the hospital. Currently, architects and engineers are collaborating to design a new wing. She wants to provide more training to the teachers, and increase their salaries. St. Boniface Haiti Foundation is now working with Catholic Relief Services and is opening an office in Port au Prince. The Spanish Red Cross has offered to help rebuild the clinic lost in the earthquake. And with help from Polish organizations a brand new maternal health center and neonatal unit is under construction. *It looks like the St. Boniface Haiti Foundation is continuing their work in Fond des Blancs. After spending the afternoon with Mrs. Nannette Canniff, I am not at all surprised that the organization is making new plans to improve their work in the future. To say I was inspired by this woman seems too cliché, yet after hearing her stories I found a new passion for my work. She is definitely the kind of grandmother I'd like to be, tea cookies or not.*

## Edwidge Danticat: A Haitian American Writer

*I wanted to hear more about Haiti. I wanted to hear stories that gave a voice to the shared stories of many Haitians. I was hungry for more. That's when I discovered the works of Edwidge Danticat.* Danticat was born in Haiti, and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of twelve. Her work is largely influenced by her childhood spent in Haiti, and the connection that she still feels towards her homeland. She celebrates Haitian culture, yet recognizes the country's weaknesses. She explores life in Haiti, as well as the Diaspora that has scattered Haitians around the world.

"Breath, Eyes, Memory," is a novel describing the ties binding four generations of women together. Sophie Caco is raised by her Tante Atie in Haiti under the Duvalier dictatorship, until she moves to New York City to join her mother, Martine. Martine works long hours, without much sleep, because she is haunted by violent nightmares. One night while Sophie accompanies her at work, Martine explains her mother's method of "testing" her daughters to make sure that they were "good girls," pointing out that her mother stopped "testing" her at an early age. Sophie does not understand, and her mother explains that she was raped as a teenage girl by Macoutes, in a cornfield not far from her home, and impregnated with Sophie. From that point on, mother and daughter reach an understanding and begin to rely upon one another: Martine for comfort from her nightmares, and Sophie for the love of a mother she grew up without. When Sophie is eighteen, she becomes interested in an older man. Fearing her mother's reaction, she keeps their relationship a secret. Martine grows suspicious and begins "testing" Sophie weekly. Mortified, harmed, and violated by her mother, Sophie mutilates herself in an attempt to end the "testing". That evening, Sophie fails the "test," and Martine tells

Sophie to leave with the man she has betrayed her mother for. Sophie marries him, and shortly afterwards has her own daughter. The childbirth reopens old issues, injuring her body further, and plaguing her with bulimia. Unable to find comfort in her husband, she returns to Haiti with her baby girl. Her Grandma Ife and Tante Atie welcome her home, while inquiring about her relationship with her mother. Atie takes care of Ife, but is unhappy being back in her mother's home. She drinks to avoid the pain that is brought back to her by these walls. Sophie is not in Haiti long, before her mother comes looking for her. Sophie questions her mother as to why she violated her. With an apology, her mother answers that it was done to her as well. Sophie is now ready to heal, and returns to the U.S. to rejoin her husband. With a rekindled relationship, Martine confesses to Sophie that she is again pregnant, but lacks the mental strength to have the baby. One evening, Sophie returns home to an alarming message. She learns from Martine's boyfriend, that her mother has killed herself in an attempt to cut the baby out of her. Sophie returns once more to Haiti, this time with her mother's casket. Here she confronts her mother's past, the violence that brought her into this world, and the practices that have scared her. She returns home determined to provide a life that will not leave her daughter with these same scars, which have been passed from mother to daughter.

*In "Breath, Eyes, Memory," Danticat brings Haitian women to the forefront. She points to their strengths, as well as their weaknesses. Although the Caco women, found answers and strength within one another, they left scars that have passed through generations. They have fallen as victims to Duvalier's violence, as well as their own mother's violence. Sophie embraced Voodoo as a way to survive her mother's "testing," while her Grandma Ife referred to Voodoo as a means to describe the "testing" of a local girl. Throughout the story Voodoo is*

*synonymous with the strength of women. Danticat illustrated two major threads of Haitian culture in this novel.*

“The Dew Breaker,” is a series of interrelated stories. Each story has a separate plot involving a different set of characters, while connecting back to the main character. He is introduced as a mild-mannered barber, landlord, and family man living in Brooklyn, New York City, with a disfiguring scar along his face. The readers meet his artist daughter, curious about her parents’ lives in Haiti. A young woman, immigrating to the U.S. to rejoin her husband, after seven years of separation, finds it difficult to adjust to her new home inside the barber’s basement apartment. One New York woman, working as a nurse to support her family in Haiti, struggles with self-recognition in a land far from the one she grew up in. The barber’s wife relies on her faith, for God’s forgiveness of herself and redemption of her husband’s soul. Another one of the barber’s tenants travels home to Haiti after recognizing him as the murderer of his parents. An elderly bridal seamstress remains haunted by the ways in which the barber once tortured her under the Duvalier regime. A man describes the day that “Baby Doc” Duvalier fled Haiti as the day that he grew up. A young woman struggling to learn English, in an attempt to adjust to her new life in New York City, decides to join a Duvalier resistance militia. The barber’s past is revealed through his last assignment working in the Haitian prison. He is sent to kidnap a rebellious preacher. The preacher is aware of his fate, but brave and strong-willed. He proceeds with his nighttime mass, until his capture. The preacher is tortured and brought into a private room with his kidnapper. Here he makes one last surge of strength, and attacks the man responsible for his suffering, leaving a large wound across his face. Upon hearing of her brother’s capture, the preacher’s sister wildly runs towards the prison. The prison guard, fearing

his own punishment, runs from the prison. The prison guard and preacher's sister meet in the street, move to New York City, and marry each other.

*In "The Dew Breaker," Danticat ties the lives of Haitians living in New York City today to those who lived in Haiti during the Duvalier regime. She points to women as the foundation of family life, often responsible for: raising children unrecognized by their fathers, supporting their parents, and accepting the violence which destroys their families. Danticat expands the Haitian identity to those living around the world in exile, elaborating on the ways in which they have influenced Haitian culture. She describes a past that some, like the barber and bridal seamstress, long to forget, while others, such as the barber's artist daughter and the man reflecting on his childhood, seek to learn more about. She touches on the great resilience and hope of the Haitian people, through the story of the preacher and the nurse. Religion, both Voodooism and Christianity are highlighted as significant aspects of Haitian culture. This work gives voice to the modern Haitian gripping for an understanding of the past, as well as those whom lived and died at the hands of the Macoutes during the Duvalier dictatorship.*

"Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work," is a collection of personal essays or reflections. It is Danticat's most recent work, published in the wake of the 2010 earthquake. She begins the collection with the 1964 public execution of Louis Drouin and Marcel Numa, two Haitian born expatriates who had returned to their homeland to overthrow Francois Duvalier. It is a chilling scene that many credit as a turning point in Haitian history. Her next essay describes a return trip to Haiti in which she visits distant family members. She discovers that she is highly regarded as 'the journalist' by her illiterate Tante Ilyana. Danticat is left to ponder the significance of what she writes, and whether or not she is fit to act as a voice for Tante Ilyana and many other illiterate Haitians. The next essay speaks of the assassination of Haiti's



prominent radio journalist Jean Dominique. Jean had lived in exile for a number of years, but upon returning to his beloved homeland, he was killed. This sparks a discussion upon the unique Diaspora that has taken place over the last few decades, scattering Haitians across the U.S. and the rest of the world. Danticat wonders, as one of these ‘dyaspora’ whether or not she has the authority to write about Haiti. Danticat comes to realize that like Dominique’s daughter, she must write dangerously for the sake of creation. Her fifth essay is the personal story of a Haitian torture survivor, a woman who escaped death at the hands of Macoutes. She now thrives, living in New York, and speaking out against what her and so many others along with her beloved home have suffered. Danticat tells the story of her cousin, who died of Aids while living in Miami, and the effect that such a death has on his mother. In 2004, Haiti celebrated its bicentennial. Danticat recounts a familiar tale of colonization, revolution, and freedom, drawing similarities between the two lands she calls home. She continues with this theme, commenting upon Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Many Americans were surprised and outraged at the images of New Orleans, comparing it to a third world country. Next, Danticat talks of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. She tells the story of a Haitian artist, whom dies within the World Trade Center. She comments on the words of another immigrant artist Suheir Hammad “I have not written one word... no poetry in the ashes south of Canal Street.” Danticat’s next essay explores the spiritual connections between an American born Haitian artist, and a Haitian Voodoo Priest working as an artist. She then explores the history that inspires artists to create dangerously, bringing to light Daniel Morel, a Haitian photojournalist. He was inspired by the images of Drouin and Numa posted as propaganda following their deaths. Morel sought to expose the tragedies of Haiti. In early 2010, Morel returned to his homeland to capture the spirit, strength, and hope of Haitians. Instead he found himself capturing images of death and suffering once

again, following the January 12 earthquake. Danticat tells of her visit to Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake. She remembers visits to the graves and tents of family members. She comments on the mass graves, makeshift hospitals, and rubble. Standing in the National Cemetery, along the wall where she believes Drouin and Numa were killed, Danticat recognizes that like November 12, 1964, now January 12, 2010 marks a turning point in Haitian history. She ties this tragedy to September 11, 2001 somberly commenting that there is “no poetry in the ashes”.

*Throughout “Create Dangerously: the Immigrant Artist at Work,” Danticat comments on Haitian literature, art and history throughout her essays. She points to the construct of immigrant artists, and wonders where they fit into the world. She draws parallels between the U.S. and Haiti, pointing out that we all share more than we think with one another. She highlights the U.S. occupation of Haiti, the Duvalier dictatorship, Aristide’s rule, and post-earthquake Haiti, as major influences on Haitian culture and art. Danticat wonders at her role as an immigrant artist and the power of her work. She decides that she must “Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously”.*

*“Breath, Eyes, Memory,” “The Dew Breaker,” and “Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work,” have provided stories that give voices to the shared history, and culture of many Haitians. Danticat has highlighted the strength and hope of Haitians. She has redefined the word Haitian to include the “diaspora.” She has pointed to women as the foundation of family and religion. She has commented upon the development of Haitian culture and tradition. Danticat has allowed me to further connect historical events with the voices of those present. I will take her advice, and create dangerously myself.*

## Conclusion

I expected to learn about Haiti, but I was surprised to learn about myself over the course of my project. As I explored the history of Haiti, I found myself in disbelief. How could a people suffer so much? Why did they not have any break? I had grown up always believing in a loving God, but why would a loving God allow generations of people to suffer? I learned the answer from the Haitians. Yes, the Haitian people had suffered, but they endured with HOPE. This HOPE is different than the hope that I experience before an interview or exam. This HOPE inspires them to go to work without food, to dig corpses out of rubble, and to look towards a brighter tomorrow. I never thought that I would learn a virtue in completing my honors project.

I sought an understanding of Haitian culture and history. I searched for the voices of many. What I found was the voice of myself. I discovered my hunger for cultural competency. I learned that despite the differences in culture, we are all harmoniously similar. It is incredibly significant to be culturally sensitive, yet it is so much more significant to be humanly sensitive.

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