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Incorporation or Symbiosis: Haitians and African Americans in Mattapan

Alix Cantave

Haitians and African Americans have long historical bonds and a common history. This historical connection between African Americans and Haitians has less impact on contemporary relations between the two groups than would be expected. Current generations perceive African American and Haitian relations as a by-product of Haitian migration to the United States, disregarding nearly 200 years of history. Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, generations of African American leaders recognized Haiti as the beacon of black liberation. Léon Pamphile captures the long-standing relationship between African Americans and Haitians in his book *Haitians and African Americans: A Heritage of Tragedy and Hope*. He explains that Haitians and African Americans have remained connected throughout the centuries by oppression and by a common struggle for freedom (Pamphile 2001). Professor Robert Johnson Jr. of UMass Boston emphasizes that the Haitian Revolution does not only represent an inspiration of black freedom in the New World, but was also the genesis of African American nationalism (Johnson 2005). African Americans looked at Haiti as the symbol of hope and the new motherland. Haiti, on the other hand, opened its door and offered safe haven to slaves throughout the Americas and supported anyone committed to liberating African slaves in the New World. Some 13,000 African Americans migrated to Haiti during the 1820s, seeking refuge from racial discrimination and the cruelty associated with slavery. A second wave of

immigration to Haiti took place during the American Civil War (Pamphile 2001). In 1889, the relationship between African Americans and Haitians was institutionalized when President William Henry Harrison appointed Frederick Douglass the U.S. minister and general consul to Haiti. Douglass served in that position for two years and played a critical role in preserving Haiti's sovereignty from foreign interference and in strongly advocating for better relations between the United States and Haiti. Douglass articulated his views on Haiti and its relationship with the United States in a speech that he delivered on January 2, 1893, at the Haitian Pavilion during the dedication ceremonies at the World's Fair in Chicago's Jackson Park. Douglass described himself as a friend of Haiti and champion of the course of black liberation.

While representing the United States in Haiti, I was repeatedly charged in certain quarters, with being a friend to Haiti. I am not ashamed of that charge. I own at once, that the charge is true, and I would be ashamed to have it otherwise than true. I am indeed a friend to Haiti, but not in the sense my accusers would have you believe. They would have it that I preferred the interest of Haiti, to the just claims of my own country, and this charge I utterly deny and defy any man to prove it. I am a friend of Haiti and a friend of every other people upon whom the yoke of slavery had been imposed. (Douglass 1893)

The connection between African Americans and Haitians predated Frederick Douglass. Prince Sanders, a Vermont-born African-American educator who studied at Dartmouth College, was an adviser to self-proclaimed king Henry Christophe (1806–1820) and was responsible for developing Christophe's education and public health plans. Sanders later served as attorney general of Haiti and lived there until his death in 1839. In 1823, Reverend Thomas Paul, the pastor of the first black Baptist church in Boston, spent six months in Haiti, met with President Jean-Pierre Boyer, and devised a plan to invite African Americans to immigrate to Haiti (Johnson 2005). In a statement published on July 1, 1824, in the *Columbian Sentinel*, a Boston-based journal, Reverend Paul stated that:

Having been in residence for some months in the Island of Hayti, I am fully persuaded that it is the best and most suitable place of residence which Providence has hitherto offered to emancipated people of colour, for the enjoyment of liberty and equality with their attendant blessings.” (*Columbian Sentinel* 1821)

In addition to persuading African Americans to seek liberty and refuge in Haiti, African American leaders also contributed to institution-building in Haiti. In 1864, an African American Episcopal priest from Connecticut, James Theodore Holly, founded the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti. He built the Holy Trinity Church (the Episcopal cathedral in Port-au-Prince), schools, and medical facilities. He remained in Haiti until his death in March 1911. African-American leaders and civil rights organizations have also been vocal about the U.S. role in Haiti. African Americans decried the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915–1934). In 1930, the NAACP commissioned its general secretary, James Weldon Johnson, to investigate the brutality of the occupation. He issued a report that criticized the U.S. military presence. W. E. B. DuBois condemned the occupation in the pages of *The Crisis*, NAACP’s magazine (Pamphile 2001).

African American networks and organizations such as the Congressional Black Caucus and TransAfrica continue to champion the Haitian cause. The Congressional Black Caucus remains the primary voice in the U.S. Congress advocating for better U.S.-Haiti relations and more effective policy toward Haiti. TransAfrica’s founding director, Randall Robinson, condemned U.S. involvement in Haiti, in particular the removal of Haitian president Jean Bertrand Aristide in 2004 (Robinson 2007).

African Americans revered the historical and legendary significance of Haiti as the beacon of black liberty. They have also been disappointed by Haiti’s political instability, underdevelopment, and the inability of successive governments to lead the country toward stability and prosperity (Douglass 1893, Pamphile 2001). The image of an impoverished people seeking political and economic refuge from its own society underlies contemporary African American and Haitian relations. It is the image of a large number of Haitians arriving at American shores and airports. Largely uninformed of the historical bonds that exist between them, the

present generations of Haitians and African Americans find themselves in an uneasy coexistence marked by cultural and language differences aggravated by miscommunication and misconceptions. These differences greatly influence relations between members of the two groups who find themselves sharing the same neighborhoods in Boston, South Florida, and New York City. In describing her experience as a Haitian immigrant in New York City in the mid-1970s, the social linguist Flore Zéphir illustrates the stance of Haitians in America:

I arrived in this country in 1975, I could not help noticing that the Haitian community was a closed community, and that Haitians' lives outside of work revolved around Haitians. I do not recall meeting non-Haitians at Haitians' gatherings, nor do I recall Haitians telling me about their attending the gathering of "others." (Zéphir 1996)

As Haitians continue to move to the United States in large numbers seeking economic opportunities and refuge from political repression and environmental degradation, their relationship with African Americans has also become more obvious. Haitians are settling in larger numbers in predominantly African American neighborhoods, and their U.S.-born children identify with African Americans and face many of the same issues as black youth in urban America. As Zéphir observed, Haitians remain an isolated group. This group centripetality greatly influences the relationship between Haitians and African Americans as well as how African Americans perceive Haitians as a group. This article examines the degree of group interaction between Haitians and African Americans in Mattapan, a neighborhood of Boston. It looks at the role that community-based organizations serving the neighborhood play in intergroup collaboration, and where and whether Haitians and African Americans actually interact. It further explores some of the group perceptions that influence Haitian and African American relations. The primary data for this analysis are based on 20 key informant interviews of Haitian and African American community leaders who have either lived or worked in Mattapan for at least three years. Data from the key informant interviews are supplemented with additional data from an assessment of the Haitian

community in Boston that the William Monroe Trotter Institute at UMass Boston has conducted in collaboration with the Center for Community-Based Research (CCBR) at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. As part of the Haitian community assessment, the Trotter Institute and CCBR conducted: (1) 42 key informant interviews of Haitian religious leaders, business owners, social providers, health care professionals, and representatives of the Haitian media in Boston; and (2) nine focus groups with 78 Haitian participants. Data from the assessment interviews and focus groups provide valuable information about Haitians' attitudes toward the concept of neighborhood and the "Americanization" of Haitian-American youths.

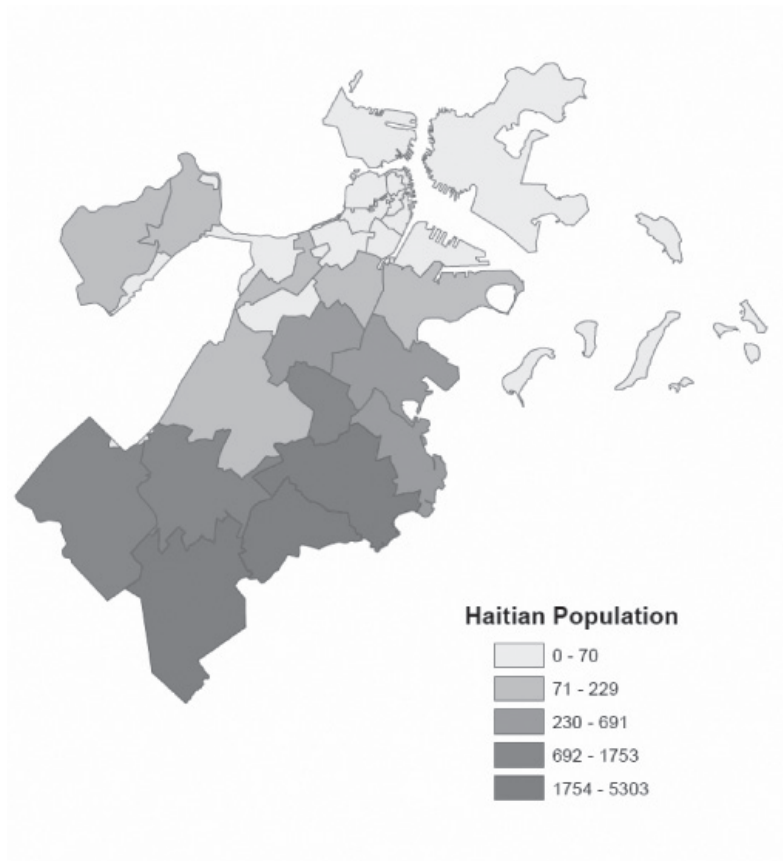
Haitians in the United States

There are no exact counts of the number of Haitians in the United States. Some estimates have placed the number of Haitians in the country at about 2 million, including immigrants, the undocumented, and those who claim Haitian ancestry. The 2000 Census, for instance, counted 419,317 foreign-born Haitians. Additionally, between 1985 and 1999, 959,319 Haitians entered the United States with nonimmigrant status or temporary visitor's visas (Zéphir 2004). A total of 210,438 nonimmigrant visas were granted to Haitians between 2000 and 2008, bringing the total nonimmigrant visas granted to Haitians since 1985 to 1.2 million. Furthermore, 548,199 people claimed Haitian ancestry in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2004; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services). It is estimated that more than half of the Haitians who entered with nonimmigrant visas stayed in the United States. Based on the various sources and counts, an estimate of 2 million Haitians and Haitian Americans in the country is reasonable. More-systematic demographic work is warranted to determine a more accurate count.

The vast majority of Haitians in the United States are concentrated in Florida, New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. These four states account for 89 percent of the Haitian-born population in the country. Massachusetts, with about 44,000 Haitian-born residents, has the third-largest population. About 43 percent, or 19,000, of the state's Haitian population live in Boston (2000 Census; BRA 2007). In fact, Haitians represent 10 percent, the largest share, of Boston's foreign-born population. Addi-

tionally, Haitian-born residents represent about 14 percent of Boston's black population. As the map below shows, Mattapan and Hyde Park are the two Boston neighborhoods with the largest concentration of Haitian immigrants. Mattapan also has the largest percentage of blacks in the city of Boston.

**Haitian Population
by Neighborhoods
Boston, 2000**



Mattapan

The neighborhood of Mattapan is located on the southeastern edge of Boston and shares borders with South Dorchester, Roxbury, Hyde Park, and Roslindale. Originally part of Dorchester and annexed into Boston in 1870, Mattapan was a Jewish neighborhood from the late 1890s until the early 1960s. The neighborhood became predominantly black or African American in the 1960s and 1970s. Based on the 2000 Census, more than 77 percent of the neighborhood's population of 37,607 is African American or Caribbean. Since the 1980s, Mattapan has been experiencing another demographic shift. Large numbers of Caribbean immigrants have arrived and are continuing to move into the neighborhood. Mattapan currently has the largest Haitian population in Massachusetts. The presence of the Haitian population in Mattapan is evident by the number of Haitian churches, businesses, social service agencies, and other institutions. Mattapan also has a number of religious, service, and business institutions that historically catered to the African American population. Those institutions are also changing to reflect the latest demographic shift. The newly arrived Haitians live next to African Americans who have been in Mattapan for more than 50 years. While Mattapan is generally classified as a low-income neighborhood, it has a solid middle-class enclave. Similar to other inner-city neighborhoods, Mattapan faces a multitude of challenges that require active community engagement and the participation of all residents.

Mattapan has long been characterized by high crime rates, high street-gang activities, and high poverty rates. In fact, Mattapan has one of the higher neighborhood distress index scores in Boston, based on a matrix developed by Professor James Jennings of Tufts University (Jennings 2009).

Mattapan also has the highest density of African Americans and Haitians in Boston. Haitians are disproportionately affected by all the challenges that the neighborhood faces. For instance, a senior staffer at the Haitian-American Public Health Initiative (HAPHI), a community organization located in Mattapan, stated that by May 2009 there were approximately 244 foreclosures in the neighborhood and estimated that 80 percent of the affected homeowners were Haitians. Haitian native Creole speakers in Limited English Proficiency classes had the highest increase

in high school dropout rates in Boston Public Schools between 2003 and 2006 (Mauricio Gastón Institute 2009). The dropout rate from Haitian LEP students increased from 3.6 percent in 2003 to 10.6 percent in 2006, nearly a threefold increase. Haitian youths are also deeply involved in neighborhood violence, both as victims and perpetrators. A 21-year-old Haitian man was murdered at a house party, execution-style, on September 21, 2009.

The destinies of Haitians and African Americans in Mattapan are connected by a new common struggle and the spatial realities of sharing the same neighborhood. Both groups fail to understand those shared realities. Organizations serving the neighborhood acknowledge them but have done little to address them. In addition to Mattapan, Haitians in Boston are concentrated in the four neighborhoods with the highest black population density and the highest scores on the distress index: Mattapan, Hyde Park, Dorchester, and Roxbury.

African American and Haitian Coexistence in Mattapan

A preliminary analysis of the Mattapan survey data shows signs of what Professor Glenn Jacobs of UMass Boston describes as centripetality and centrifugality among Haitians in Mattapan. Haitian adults as well as Haitian-based organizations tend to be ethnocentric and are less likely to form cross-ethnic ties or establish meaningful community relationships with African Americans. Haitians in Mattapan still live in a closed community similar to what Zéphir found in New York City more than three decades ago. Haitian and African American adults appear to coexist in Mattapan amid a web of misconceptions, misunderstandings, and other sociocultural barriers that prevent the two groups from forming community ties that can strengthen the community. African Americans and Haitians in Mattapan worship in different churches, speak different languages, frequent different businesses, and, to some degree, buy food from different supermarkets. African Americans and Haitians see Mattapan differently.

Haitians often refer to Mattapan as “the Haitian community.” Haitian views are consistent with how community was defined by participants of the focus groups conducted by the Trotter Institute and CCBP at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. The most common definitions of community,

based on the focus group results, are: (1) a group of people with the same norms and culture who are united together; (2) a group of people who have the same idea, who have the same cultures, and who live in the same area; and (3) a group of people from the same place who speak the same language and live in the same area. One participant describes community as “a group of people with the same norms and culture who are united.” Throughout the focus groups, men and women referred to the Haitian community as a particular entity. They did not refer to “the community” as the neighborhoods in which they lived. The Haitian informants described Mattapan as the center of the Haitian community with a large concentration of services and businesses catering to Haitians. They also think that Haitians represent the majority of Mattapan’s population. African Americans described Mattapan as an ethnically diverse community that has gone through many demographic transitions, a community that transitioned from being predominantly Jewish to predominantly black in the 1960s and 1970s. They see Mattapan as being predominantly African American with a significant Caribbean population, including Haitians. Both groups agreed that a significant portion of Mattapan’s population is Haitian. Haitians believed they are the majority. One Haitian informant said, “The majority of Mattapan’s population is Haitian.” Another stated that “Mattapan has the largest concentration of Haitians, as well as Haitian businesses and services.” On the other hand, an African American informant described Mattapan as “an ethnically-diverse neighborhood in transition, with a significant middle-income African-American population.”

There are several areas of agreement between African Americans and Haitians. One was the issues that they think affect all residents of Mattapan. African American and Haitian informants agreed that they include education and poor-quality schools, crime, and health disparities. Among the most critical issues facing Mattapan, the informants mentioned the lack of affordable housing and an inadequate number of services. The detached relationship between African Americans and Haitians, however, hinders their ability to come together to address the issues that they agreed are affecting the neighborhood and both groups. The poor or nonexistent relationship between the groups is another area where African Americans and Haitians agreed. The two groups coexist with limited interaction in a manner that one key informant described

as “cordial, but no integration” in a kind of a “fragile peace”; or as another informant observed: “There are no conflicts between Haitians and African Americans because there are no interactions.”

On the other hand, Haitian youths are more likely to incorporate into the larger black community and form cross-ethnic and cross-national ties. Haitian adults asserted that Haitian youth assimilate faster and become identified with African Americans, or “Americanized.” This view is also consistent with how focus group participants perceive Haitian youth acculturation, which is seen as contributing to delinquency, poor school performance, and involvement in crime and violence. Basically, by becoming acculturated, according to the informants and focus group participants, Haitian youths abandoned their “old ways” (Haitian) and became delinquent—what Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut have identified as negative incorporation (Portes & Rumbaut 2006). This is a statement not only about the acculturation of Haitian youths in the African American community but also the perception of some Haitians of African Americans. Thus, the isolation of Haitians in Mattapan can be described as an attempt to maintain their “old ways” and resist negative incorporation. On the other side, African Americans see Haitians as different, poor people from a poor country who speak a different language, dress differently, who keep to themselves, have loud parties, and who do not respect the community. One African American informant stated that Haitians are unaware of the struggle of African Americans toward equality and civil rights so that all blacks can enjoy the freedom and opportunities that this country offers. Further, she stated that Haitians do not

Descriptions of Haitians in Mattapan

African Americans	Haitians
Not invested in the community financially	Invest in businesses in Mattapan
Isolated—not integrated in the community	Isolated
Transient—don’t stay in the community for long	Upwardly-mobile oriented
Work too much and leave children unattended	Hardworking
Lack of civic engagement	Haitian youth well-behaved
Focus on education	Haitian businesses cater only to Haitians
Think they’re better than African Americans	Poor relations with African Americans

understand that they have benefited from the gains and struggles of the civil rights movement. The table below shows some examples of how African American informants described Haitians in Mattapan and how the Haitian informants described themselves.

The reality, however, is that Mattapan is the most diverse black neighborhood in Boston, with a mixture of African Americans and blacks from the Caribbean and Africa. Mattapan is also the center of the Haitian community, with the highest density of Haitian businesses, churches, and social service agencies in Boston. Mattapan-based agencies and community organizations provide services to the larger community, irrespective of national origin or ethnicity. Haitians also access many of the services that are provided in the neighborhood via Mattapan Family Service Center, Mattapan Community Health Center, and the Church of the Holy Spirit. One of the concerns that African American informants voiced is the fact that Haitian businesses and services are very ethnocentric; they tend to serve Haitians and employ only Haitians. When African Americans carp about the lack of Haitian investment in Mattapan, they are referring to the ethnocentric tendencies of Haitian-owned businesses and Haitian-based organizations. On the other hand, when Haitians talk about their level of financial investment in Mattapan, they are referring to the services that they have provided primarily to other Haitians.

Haitian businesses and services contribute to the neighborhood and Boston's economy. According to a Boston Redevelopment Authority report, Haitians in Boston own 108 small businesses, which contributed \$222 million to local output and spent \$219 million (BRA 2007). The Mattapan community has contributed to the vibrancy of the Mattapan Square, the neighborhood's commercial center. In fact, Mattapan Square is one of the few places in the neighborhood where Haitians and African Americans cross paths.

Where African Americans and Haitians Interact

All of the informants agree that Mattapan has no definite places that facilitate and promote cross-ethnic interactions. Informants named churches as likely venues for intergroup interaction, but as several informants mentioned, each group also has its own churches. Services in Haitian churches are often in Haitian Creole or French and, therefore, not

accessible to the vast majority of the African American population. Members of the two groups do attend services at St. Angela's Roman Catholic Church on Blue Hill Avenue. The service that many Haitians attend, however, is conducted in Haitian Creole and does not provide a space for cross-ethnic interaction.

Haitian and American informants stated that the Jubilee Church on Blue Hill Avenue has the most diverse congregation. As a member of Jubilee explained, the church is very diverse, with a significant number of African American, Haitian, African, and Caribbean members. The church brings speakers that reflect the diversity of its membership. The church does not intentionally address issues of cross-ethnic or cross-nationality collaboration or interaction.

Several informants echoed the lack of community facilities, common space, and activities that can foster cross-ethnic interaction. For instance, informants mentioned the lack of community centers and youth leagues and athletic teams as an impediment to interethnic collaboration and interaction. Due to lack of intentional facilities and activities, different groups meet accidentally in Mattapan Square, the area where different groups from the neighborhood shop and access public transportation.

Mattapan CBOs and African-American and Haitian Interaction in Mattapan

Another area Haitian and African American informants agreed on is the minimal role that community organizations in Mattapan are playing in promoting interethnic collaborations and interactions. An informant from a local service provider stated that "we have not sponsored any activities to develop relationships between African Americans and Haitians because we don't see it as a problem." Another informant stated that "when Haitians are invited to community meetings or events, they don't show up, and when they do, they don't return." Haitian organizations do sponsor activities to promote intergroup interaction, a Haitian informant from a Haitian-based organization claimed. He cited the Haitian Day Parade as an example. The Haitian Day Parade is an activity that promotes Haitian pride. Several other groups participate in the actual parade but not in planning the annual event. It is also an advertising opportunity for businesses targeting the Haitian market. In fact, some informants see the

Haitian Day Parade as another example of the ethnic schism that divides Mattapan and prevents better group collaborations. This is how one informant perceives the culturally specific carnivals, including the Haitian Day Parade: “I think that it is unfortunate. Every culture is going for itself. You know, we used to have, for example, a Caribbean festival. Now we have a Haitian festival, Jamaican festival, Cape Verdean festival, Dominican festival. Everybody is kind of going for themselves when before we were really one. Black people went to it, and everyone went to it. It’s kind of like we celebrate together. But now you have three or four going on, and I think it is a way to separate us.”



Haitian American Day Parade
©2007, Haitian-Americans United, Inc.

African American–led and Haitian-based organizations in Mattapan are finding more ways to collaborate at the programmatic level. The Haitian-American Public Health Initiative (HAPHI) and the Mattapan Family Services Center (MFSC) are collaborating on an adult education program. MFSC also joined with HAPHI and the Association of Haitian Women of Boston (AFAB) on a basic adult education program. The Mat-

tapan Community Development Corporation is also working with HAPHI on foreclosure issues. HAPHI also makes referrals to MFSC and the Mattapan Community Health Center (MCHC). Organizational capacity is a major factor in limiting interethnic organizational collaborations, and cultural differences and low levels of community trust also inhibit them. Organizational collaboration is difficult, and it is already very challenging to run a neighborhood nonprofit, one of the executive directors explained. At the same time, the organizations are also facing funding challenges that may force them to form more strategic alliances. As an informant explained, "I am very big on sharing money because both parties will have to collaborate at some point, because in this economy, there's not enough money to go around."

The shrinking pool of funding is forcing organizations to simultaneously compete and collaborate. Groups have realized that they must chase the same funding and sometimes collaborate in order to be more competitive. That bow to expedience does not mean that organizations developed a common agenda or vision, however. One of the executive directors clearly expressed that view when he said that "while groups in Mattapan are working more together, I am not aware of any common agenda or space." Haitian organizations are serving Haitians and collaborating with African American-led organizations when it is financially or organizationally advantageous. African American-led organizations expand their services to Haitians and hire Haitian staff members because it is good business practice to respond to the changing demographics of Mattapan that have brought the growth in the Haitian population. While the organizations acknowledge the need for more interaction and collaboration between African Americans and Haitians, they have not been able to facilitate and promote that interaction.

There is no common space for Haitians and African Americans to interact in Mattapan.... Organizations are not in position to create that space due to lack of institutional interests. Agencies can work together, but there is no common agenda. (Haitian informant May 2008)

Conclusion

Mattapan is a diverse black community with significant African, African American, and Caribbean populations. Haitians are the most significant black immigrant population in Mattapan, a vibrant community with a very active commercial center. Mattapan is also a community with significant challenges. It is among the most distressed neighborhoods in Boston, as measured by a number of demographic and socioeconomic indicators, including poverty, educational attainment, and crime. The neighborhood also lacks sufficient community facilities and the common social space to encourage and facilitate interethnic collaborations and interactions. The relationship between African Americans and Haitians in particular is marked by miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misconception. The two groups have not been able to build on a shared history of common struggles. Haitians form a closed community, removed from the challenges that the neighborhood faces, ignoring that their children are impacted by the same issues that are affecting all black youths in Mattapan. These issues include gang violence, poor-quality education, a lack of youth services, and a lack of after-school programs. Organizations serving Mattapan have done little to promote interethnic collaboration to address some of the challenges that the neighborhood faces. The churches, which many informants said reflected the rich diversity of the neighborhood, have not fostered conversations among their members and neighborhood residents about interethnic or intergroup collaboration as a strategy to address the many challenges that the neighborhood faces. Haitians and African Americans coexist in Mattapan in a fragile peace in a cloud of misconception about culture, jobs, and inequality in services and their allocation. As many informants explained, 15 years ago there were a lot of conflicts and tensions between Haitians and African Americans. Haitians and African Americans have gotten accustomed to each other's presence and coexist in an uneasy peace in a now-quiet Mattapan, except when gang violence flares. The neighborhood is infested with gangs, with one on virtually every street. The organizations serving Mattapan have an obligation to the neighborhood and its residents to begin the process of interethnic cooperation in order to improve the quality of life of all residents. Churches with Haitian and African American mem-

bers can have group discussions on interethnic collaboration and sponsor events to encourage communication between African Americans and Haitians. The organizations serving the neighborhood already have access to both populations. They can sponsor educational and social events to encourage intergroup interaction. For instance, health disparities affect Haitians and African Americans. The organizations can cosponsor a neighborhood health fair where Haitians and African Americans can talk about common concerns about issues that affect their health status. Similar events can be held on a number of topics, including housing, education, crime, employment, and political representation. This may be the first step in formulating a common agenda for Mattapan and to create an inclusive community, as opposed to a divided space in which different groups merely coexist.



Acknowledgments

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