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Introduction

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Introduction

It's apropos that we start this issue about the immigrant impact on the demographics of Boston and New England, trends that are also apparent in other global cities, by focusing on success rather than failure. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), which Tim Sieber, an anthropologist, has written about in conjunction with Maria Centeio, an undergraduate at Harvard and an area resident, is an experiment in cross-ethnic living that has gone very well, that has benefited from good thinking and good action and good intentions right from the start. Neighbors from different cultural backgrounds support one another in protecting their property values and in living together without high fences and without fear of the outsider, judged on the basis of complexion or culture. The young are as valued as the wisdom elders. No group is considered more privileged than another. Too often, when we write about people who have less power and less visibility than the norm and are fighting their way up from the bottom of society, we emphasize the pathological, the missing, the less-than character, which we take as a given in the realm of race and its repercussions. DSNI did not start there. It studied its composition and decided that there were merits, there were plusses, there were advantages in the mix, and it would promote and strengthen those. More than twenty-five years ago, the men and women who pushed to transform the blocks around Dudley Street from blight into social oasis conceived a multilingual world foregrounding connectedness and caring, which they understood as indispensable to their vision of the future, and they marched forward to meet it.

In Boston, we have seen the future and we endorse it. On the other hand, in some areas of the city and its environs, the future is still struggling to be born in the midst of severe impediments. That is particularly true in Revere and Lynn, on the northern outskirts of Boston, where the fifth-largest settlement of Cambodian refugees in this country is based.

The Khmer American or Cambodian experience has not been positive. Shirley Tang, a professor of American studies, tells us that many of the supports they had been given by the federal government as members of a protected group were withdrawn, and they are now struggling to maintain themselves outside the status of a criminal class to which many of the younger residents have been assigned. Other young folk have been deported as undesirables, sent back to a country from which they were long separated and where they no longer feel they belong. Where do they belong? Where are they citizens? These are questions that they are asking and as yet have not answered. Because of general neglect and disregard, many in the younger generations are angry. Some have turned to drugs and are regularly abused by the police. It is difficult for them to stay in school and improve themselves educationally. They are society's stepchildren, stuck on the margins of comfort, on the margins of visibility, on the margins of acceptance. The resistance they have managed to muster is expressed most vigorously in cultural form, especially in a Cambodian New Year celebration that allows for ritual renewal of their identity and their sense of worth as a people with a history and a culture of value that stresses merit-making or right behavior.

Over the last ten or so years, the Maya K'iche, a mountain group displaced by war in Guatemala, has settled in coastal New Bedford, where for the most part they are forced to take the lowest level of employment in factories in a city that has a history of offering opportunity to others but is now declining in prosperity, particularly in the manufacturing sector. In 2007, almost four hundred K'iche workers in a local New Bedford factory that packaged fish were arrested and charged with being undocumented; roughly half of those detained were deported. The ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raid made the K'iche community more vulnerable as well as more visible than it had previously been. This, in turn, brought the group to the attention of university scholars and public activists, many of them curious to delve more deeply into the K'iche insistence that its members belonged to Amerindian history and tradition and did not define itself as Latino. Organization Maya K'iche (OMK), which functions in an advocacy capacity on behalf of the community, has partnered with scholars such as Jorge Capetillo-Ponce and Giselle Abreu-Rodriguez in an effort to better understand and document the group's dy-

namics, demographics, social networking, and group infrastructure. The article printed here is the first formal study focused on the group and the ways it was changed by the traumatic intervention of the raid, as well as on the organizational resources that the OMK brings to bear and needs to augment in order to achieve its goals more effectively. Many K'iche have established ties in New Bedford, and they feel that this is their home. Yet they do not wish to assimilate, and they adamantly hold to their K'iche language, which they feel keeps them grounded in Mayan understanding. Gender is a big dividing line in K'iche society, with men usually enjoying more power than women. Some of this power is linguistically expressed. Women are sometimes relegated to speaking only K'iche, limiting their interaction with those outside the group. The role of outside forces became pronounced in the post-raid period, and the K'iche community is wrestling with which direction would be beneficial for the greater number, toward or away from more assimilation.

Chelsea, in very close proximity to Boston, is immigrant central, and many of those newcomers and more established residents are Latino, whether of older or more recent vintage, meaning Puerto Rican or Salvadoran. Centro Latino and the Chelsea Collaborative, both more than twenty years old, provide the lens through which sociologist Glenn Jacobs studies the diverse Latino community in Chelsea. In particular, Jacobs follows the impact of an organizational decision that seemed almost suicidal but in the end increased the capability and financial security of Centro Latino. Despite that success, some communication difficulties still exist between administrative echelons and threaten to hamper the forward movement of the organization, which has undergone another change through merger. Professionalism is emphasized at Centro Latino, which is run by Juan Vega, and this works well with the work ethic that many immigrants possess and promote as a given. They tend to be ambitious, determined to work hard and long to improve their circumstances, not only for themselves but also for their children and relatives. Gladys Vega, head of the Chelsea Collaborative, worked her way up through the administrative ranks of the organization, starting off as a receptionist. Always, she had the interest of an advocate, concerned that the Latino clients have a role in the decision making so that their needs and concerns would be addressed in ways that they determined. Vega's goal is social action, but

some staff members affiliated with the Chelsea Collaborative engage in activities that cut very close to political involvement and agitation, neither of which is permissible for an agency that depends on public funding. A fine line has to be continually negotiated. On the plus side, the Chelsea Collaborative is open to working with other communities wherever and whenever a situation threatens the socially disadvantaged. It thrives on coming up with answers that are right for the community, and has a history of getting things done. Activism and advocacy can be close cousins, as Centro Latino, the primarily service-providing agency, and Chelsea Collaborative, the advocacy specialist, demonstrate.

The relationship between the island nation of Haiti and African Americans born in the United States is long-standing. When Africans were deprived of a territorial homeland and scattered throughout the Atlantic world as virtually homeless, stateless entities, not even bearing the name “people” any longer, the uprooted found emotional resonance first with the original continent and then with Haiti, which had achieved the unthinkable. The men and women of Haiti, in its time an extremely rich colony, perhaps the richest ever, had fought for and won a victory against oppression. Under Toussaint, they put the French, including Napoleon, to flight and proclaimed their independence. The revolution that they waged was as monumental, and some would argue even more outstanding, as the French and American Revolutions, all taking place at the end of the eighteenth century. Since that time, the Haitians have been maligned at home and abroad; many have fled to other countries in order to improve their circumstances. After New York and Miami, the third-largest concentration of Haitians and Haitian Americans is in Massachusetts. In this issue, Alix Cantave shines a light on interactions between Haitian American residents of Mattapan, where Haitians are most concentrated in Boston, and African Americans. Their relations are not the best, for the most part. The Haitian community keeps to itself and thinks of blacks as a criminal element, destructive to their closely held traditions and best avoided. The African American community finds members of the Haitian American community to be concerned only about their own and to disdain outsiders, particularly blacks, whom for the most part they see as beneath them, not as upwardly mobile, not savvy from a business perspective. What exists between the two groups is at best “a fragile peace.”

This issue was going to press at the time that a horrific earthquake hit Haiti, devastating the capital city and its environs. What was the poorest nation in this part of the world became even poorer, perhaps so poor and so undone that its fate is little different than if it had suffered the onslaught of an aggressive all-out war. Thousands are hurt. Thousands are hungry. Thousands are homeless. Thousands are dead. The island will never again be the same. That is the bad news. Therein might also lie some of the good news. Haiti, as poor as it was, the victim of nature, the victim of oppressive internal regimes, the victim of agencies intending to do good but not always managing to do so, the playground of a play for power by other nations, will have to rebuilt. In the rebuilding and in the rush to the scene of the catastrophe, which is what Haiti is experiencing now, let us keep in mind that this is a nation whose people have pulled freedom out of the jaws of victim of oppressive internal regimes, the victim of the greed and misdirection of others. Haiti has taken on metaphoric status for the black world even though some Haitians deny that they are black. Denial does not necessarily constitute the truth. What remains true over the centuries is that Haitians wrote themselves indelibly into history when they made a pledge at Bois Caiman, a wooded grove that functioned as sacred ground, that they would fight to the death for their liberty, for their right to be men and women of full stature. They are fighting again and they are again determined to overcome. Our prayers and our faith are with them and their resilience.

The Dominican Republic shares the same island as Haiti. Early in the nineteenth century, when men and women who had been enslaved were looking for a place to start afresh, far from the imprimatur of slavery, they considered emigration from America to Haiti and settled in various locations. Before the middle of the century, Haiti possessed the entire island and the Haitian government offered asylum to thousands of refugees from North American slavery. A group found its way to what is now the Dominican Republic, settling in a place called Samaná. They struggled hard to maintain their language, their religion, their traditions, their customs and institutions, much as the Haitian Americans are doing in Mattapan, New York, New Jersey, Miami, Montreal, and elsewhere. Over time, however, as the emigrant children attended school in Spanish and married outside the group, the isolation could not be maintained and many of the

old days and old ways were forgotten. One of the descendants of Samaná, Ryan Mann-Hamilton, a doctoral candidate, returns for a family reunion and decides to capture what memories remain from his aunts and uncles.

“So we’re black,” one of the younger cousins exclaims. He had thought of himself as Dominican, a people who consistently consider themselves better than Haitians, with a full-scale massacre against Haitians in their history as evidence plus contemporary laws to deny citizenship to Haitian settlers. This one-upmanship is a way of coping with and denying the effects of being looked down upon by others. To erase the prospect of being demeaned, one demeans another; it’s the old saga repeated of the husband kicking the wife and the wife kicking the kids, who then kick the dog. Because of pasts forgotten, pasts denied, pasts destroyed, the lines of demarcation from one group to another are often complicated, not simple. And some histories bear reflections of today. Case in point: The United States and France were at odds over who would reign in the Caribbean island. France wanted to establish a French Caribbean empire governed from the island, and the United States, through Frederick Douglass, its emissary, was thinking of claiming the island for the United States. On different scales, France and the United States are again vying over which one will control the rebuilding of Haiti, bringing to mind two aggressive dogs fighting over a gigantic fallen carcass. Which one will enjoy the lion’s share of death?

Haiti succeeded once; may it succeed again. Perhaps the destruction in Haiti was a bellwether of different times, of a reordering long overdue, of building new from the rubble of the old.

— ***Barbara Lewis, PhD***

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