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Commentary

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Commentary

Kenneth J. Cooper

It's an explanation often heard around Boston. Why hasn't the city ever elected a black mayor? Because the black community is "too small." Why can't the community sustain an FM radio station? And why does it have difficulty keeping afloat a weekly newspaper, even a soul food restaurant? Again, the answer comes: the community is too small. The irreconcilable flaw of this line of reasoning is exposed when it is expanded to the whole country. Black mayors have been elected in any number of cities with smaller black populations, proportionally, than the 25 percent in Boston—Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Denver, to name but three. Black-owned media and soul food restaurants manage to survive in those cities too.

Boston's black community, functionally, feels smaller than it is because it is so divided, into the old-line black Brahmins, the relative newcomers from the South, and the immigrants from the islands of the Caribbean, from Cape Verde and the rest of Africa. Except for mainland African immigrants, the presence of these groups is not new in the Commonwealth. As far back as the 1880s, West Indians who lived in Boston had the heft to publish a weekly newspaper, one, by the way, designed to appeal to a general black audience. The Cape Verdean population predates, by a century, the influx of southerners during the Great Migration.

Just a few decades ago, black Boston residents born in America and those with immigrant origins worked together to cast off systematic segregation in city schools and wanton discrimination in workplaces. A large number of community leaders from that older generation have Caribbean roots—Mel King, Michael Haynes, and Ken Guscott as well as the late Elma Lewis, Ruth Batson, and John Bynoe. John Cruz, father and son, have Cape Verdean ancestry. Those descendants of immigrants found

common cause with their native-born peers, Otto and Muriel Snowden, Tom Atkins, Paul Parks, John O'Bryant, Jean McGuire, and Ed Brooke. Though not everybody got along just fine all the time, both groups, and that was not how they were aligned, collaborated to achieve shared goals. So what happened to the unity? Has it dissipated because in-your-face racism no longer presses down on everyone black? It's a facile answer, one that falsely assumes that the only sources of unity come from outside the community.

What has changed are the numbers. Since 1965, when a new law made immigration to the United States far less Eurocentric, the proportion of the city's black population born abroad has grown apace. It is now more than 25 percent. Add to the number of black immigrants their children, and the figure reaches 41 percent. Nationally, 8 percent of black residents were born abroad, according to census estimates. In New York City, a third of the black residents are foreign-born, more than half immigrants or their children.

In Boston, the tens of thousands of new arrivals from Africa and the Caribbean have made possible the creation of service, advocacy, or social organizations based on national origin and, in the case of immigrant Africans, ethnicity or even home village. Low-power radio stations, or dedicated radio or cable TV programs, speak for and to the black immigrant communities, sometimes in languages that native-born blacks cannot comprehend, like Haitian Creole. The city's traditional soul food restaurants, Bob the Chef's and Ma Dixon's, have faded into history, but eateries serving Caribbean food, usually with a particular island's flavor, or offering Cape Verdean, Ethiopian, or West African cuisine, have opened. This diversifying at the dining table has fractured what, in business terms, had been a single market, and, socially, one community.

Other cities have experienced the same change. Starting farther south on I-95 than he could have, Joel Dreyfuss, the Haiti-born managing editor of *TheRoot.com*, noted in a forward-looking essay as this decade began that "the influx of black Africans and West Indians has created far less cohesive communities in major American cities from New York to Washington, D.C., to Atlanta." With the loss of cohesion have come intraracial tensions. Some involve who is to be called what. Haitian immigrants may want to be called Haitian or Caribbean or West Indian, but

not African American and maybe not black. The people narrowly thought of as African Americans may not accept naturalized African immigrants as African Americans, though literally that is what they are. Some younger black people in Boston speak of different black “ethnic groups,” distinctions that seem to be made on the basis of national, regional, or continental origin.

The more serious tensions have to do with clashing perceptions of who’s better than whom. As Alix Cantave notes in his article about Boston’s Mattapan neighborhood, Haitian residents associate Americanness (that is, being African American) with the negative characteristics of criminality and low academic achievement, a thought pattern—if expressed by whites—that would be branded racist. Before the devastating earthquake, which has evoked empathy from every corner, some American-born blacks looked down on Haitian immigrants as being from a pathetically poor, ungovernable country. Some of the native-born fear African and Caribbean immigrants are displacing them from good jobs and selective universities. Africans can rightly claim to be the most educated group of immigrants; as such, most ought to recognize the fallacy of comparing the academic achievement of their self-selected group with the entire population of American-born blacks. The same goes for comparisons made by other immigrant groups, who usually represent the most motivated of their countrymen, if not also the most prosperous and best educated when they depart their homelands.

Everyone needs to let go of the idea of being better than other people who look just like them. That attitude is as silly, frankly, as siblings from the same womb asserting their superiority to one another. Then black folks born in the USA and those native to other countries ought to start talking to each other much more than they have done. A good place to begin would be a thorough discussion of shared history, starting with the triangular trade that, by one estimate, saw 80 percent of captives landed in North American ports first spend time in the Caribbean; “reverse” migrations to Liberia and Haiti, as well as Haitian arrivals in New Orleans, all during the 1800s; the contributions to U.S. history and culture of West Indians like Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, and Stokely Carmichael; and the traditional acceptance into the African American mainstream of black immigrants and their descendants. Outwardly, what marks Colin

Powell as the son of (Jamaican) immigrants? Not much.

In this dialogue, the burden should not solely be on newcomers to adapt to the broader black society. American-born blacks have been criticized, with some justification, for having warm feelings toward Africa but not Africans. The same might be said about the Haiti of glorious history versus the Haitians of today in America. The native-born could stand to learn about, respect, and appreciate the cultures of black immigrants, their customs, foods, languages. Even though the resistance of some to being called “African American” or “black” may cause open-minded blacks born in America to feel a sense of rejection, they should keep on arguing for the inclusiveness of the term, which the U.S. Census Bureau defines as having the same meaning, racially. Being Haitian or Jamaican or Bajan is a different issue, a matter of national origin. At the same time, native-born blacks should keep in mind that having a racial label rejected by people who live in the same neighborhoods and look the same is a relatively mild dose of rejection, compared with others endured in the past on these shores.

The stakes in avoiding the subdivision of African Americans or blacks into “ethnic groups” based on immigrant origins are high. In Boston, it will make the difference in whether a growing quarter of the population continues to play small in local politics or starts deciding winners and losers. The cost of disunity and disengagement can be seen in the Senate victory of Scott Brown in a special election with unimpressive voter turnout in the city’s black precincts. For black immigrants, the Republican’s win probably means the undocumented can forget about a path to U.S. citizenship or amnesty, which Brown opposes, anytime soon. That means fewer black voters in Boston, and perhaps a longer wait for a black mayor to finally move into City Hall. The late Senator Edward M. Kennedy favored normalizing the status of unauthorized immigrants. His first major piece of legislation was the 1965 immigration law that lifted quotas and opened the country to many more people from Africa and the Caribbean. Black immigrants may know about that legislative history. What they may not know is that immigration law owes its egalitarian principles to the civil rights movement.