The Border of Lights Reader

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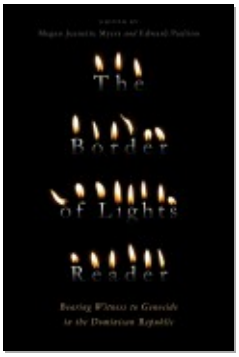

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Border of Lights Historical and Personal Narrative

Rana Dotson and DeAndra Beard, las hermanas Beard (the Beard sisters)

> *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*
>
> —DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Written by Rana Dotson

It had been a delirious few days. I didn't know how I would make the trip to Rutgers University alone, sleep deprived and exhausted, driving with my breastfeeding infant. I had been attempting to make the three-and-a-half-day conference, but sunrise on the last day found me at home in Maryland in bed, still feeling depleted. Then a thought struck me with crystal clarity: *You're going for the meeting after the meeting.* My eyes flew open and my feet hit the floor.

The preceding eight years had been a whirlwind for me and my husband Julian grinding-out young newlywed start-up status: navigating the Washington DC-metro area as "transplants" while completing graduate school, securing gainful employment, finding the house we would call home, starting what would become our family of five. The grind had included wrapping up a master's degree in Public Policy, specializing in International Security and Economic policy, from the Maryland School of Public Policy, UMD College Park. I had spent a semester at the Inter-Agency Consultation on Race in Latin America (IAC), whose secretariat was based at The Inter-American Dialogue (IAD) in Washington D.C. Under the leadership of Judith Morrison, the IAC worked to address issues of race discrimination, social exclusion, and other problems confronted by people of African descent in Latin America. I began researching my capstone paper on the implications of the DR-CAFTA Trade Agreement for the most marginalized communities in the Dominican Republic which was being debated in Congress.

I knew there were important missing perspectives. In that debate which so often spoke of higher tides lifting all boats, I wondered about those who lived by the sea and possessed no boats. I had learned so much more than classroom variety political science and econom-

ics in the undergraduate semester years earlier (1999) at the Pontificia Universidad Maestra y Madre (PUCMM) in Santiago, Dominican Republic: my dark-brown-skinned, natural-haired presence was not the norm on campus. Though I developed close friendships and a love for many aspects of the culture that hosted me, a semester spent experiencing Black invisibility in an overwhelmingly African-descendant country had also been disorienting and traumatic. Subtle and overt racism forced me to relive the most difficult racial traumas of my Indiana childhood, with the script flipped in a dystopian twist. The same racist ideas and expressions originating from the historically Klan-influenced area of my youth were now being deployed by people who looked like my own, brown-skinned family members against other brown-skinned people. Some of the milder experiences ranged from being loudly berated by old men in the streets: *Get out the sun; you're already dark enough!* To being startled from deep sleep on my sister's shoulder to the sight of towering armed guards demanding our I.D. to disprove what our dark-skin implicated: we were Haitians sneaking into the Dominican Republic on the bus line heading from the Dominican-Haitian border back towards Santiago. Then there were the fellow public transportation passengers who debated my ethnic heritage as if I were an inanimate object sitting idly by: *She's Haitian, that's why she never takes care of her hair. She speaks English because her Haitian parents moved to the US and taught her English*. Never mind that I would have proudly claimed bloodline from the world's first Black-led republic if I could. The foundation of the ludicrously constructed fantasy these men built to remake my identity was laid upon their idea that anything Haitian was undesirable and unworthy: a ubiquitous, ever-present racist foundation which years later would become the springboard for the official reconstruction of the identities of hundreds of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian-descent in the country.

These daily experiences testified to the reach, depth, and legacy of anti-Black economically motivated ideas that had driven the slave trade throughout the Americas centuries before; persistent economic and political inequalities guarded by complex racial and ethnic norms still enforced an iron-clad system of racial social hierarchy. I found little solace knowing that my U.S. citizenship shielded me from the most punishing effects of the racial caste system in that country. The understanding only pronounced the dread and powerlessness to defend others, some friends, who looked like me but lacked any such protection. It was devastating to confront the pernicious capacity of racist ideologies to innovate for particular cultural contexts. The vastness of that system, exported to every place European colonizers had landed, was daunting. I had learned in my Afro-Caribbean History and Culture class, taught by Natacha Calderon, that in the case of the Dominican Republic, it was the darkest-skinned Dominicans and Dominicans of Haitian-descent whose Haitian identity stood as proxy for "Black" and "undesirable immigrants," it was they who bore the brunt of the racial hierarchy. My being judged to belong to either category meant being treated accordingly, for better or for worse, by the people I met. The worst treatment was often divvied out by Dominican men. Yet, it was a young Dominican man who passionately challenged me to act in solidarity with Dominicans who were engaged in a struggle for true freedom and racial healing. Recalling the Black freedom struggle which had made my life in the United States a possibility, he looked me dead in the eyes, and asked, "Why don't you (all) do something?" The reality was complicated; Black Americans in the United States

were overwhelmingly unaware of the struggles within the diaspora, and we all had work to do to develop the experience, skills, and knowledge to make meaningful contributions. But his question was a call to action that stung.

Ana María Belique (Reconoci.do lead activist) would tell me pointedly years later, "the only difference between you and me is that my ancestors' ship stopped before yours at a different place." Her words uplifted our common story of African heritage, survival and resistance and the cosmic fine hair-splitting difference of events that led to her being born Black in the Dominican Republic and me being born Black in the United States. My sister DeAndra Beard and I were born in a white, semi-agricultural, blue-collar industrial Midwestern town and raised within a deeply nurturing and protective community of extended family, replete with dozens, if not hundreds, of real and play aunties and uncles common within Black American kinship networks. This included the deeply rooted and extended family network within the church our maternal and paternal great-grandparents had established on the heels of the last wave of the Great Migration in the early 1930s. These were people who two generations from slavery had come north from points south to set down roots, purchase land, and eventually raise the beams of the church edifice with their own hands. They navigated the boundaries between our immediate community and the majority white surrounding community, forging bonds of respect.

The lessons we learned growing up within this pioneering, spiritually attuned, industrious and mutually supportive community has been the bedrock foundation grounding us in our work within the Dominican Republic, Haiti and beyond. In our navigating the boundaries within our own community, we had come to understand that "the other" was not always the enemy. Our families had worked to cultivate deeply meaningful relationships with white community members, and even while the Klan demonstrated openly in our town square, an overwhelming counter-rally was attended by Blacks and whites standing shoulder-to-shoulder. DeAndra had been a leader in that work. I had also cut my teeth in activism as a teenager, after a group of students suffered police brutality that ended with the police chief personally apologizing to me and my family and instituting racial sensitivity training for the local police department. Both DeAndra and I followed the footsteps of our oldest sister, Devona, who modeled the intellectual curiosity and moral courage that landed us within the pages of Malcolm X's story, Hurston, Giavonni, Baldwin, Angelou, Rustin, among others, and which led each of us to complete undergraduate studies at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). For the first time, on those hallowed grounds, we were truly free to learn. For the first time we found intellectual homes where were not made to feel encumbered but rather liberated by our state of Blackness.

In the course of my draft paper on trade issues being circulated from the IAC to congressional staffers it became clear that more in-depth research would be needed to get a full understanding of the dynamics and challenges faced by the most marginalized communities within the Dominican Republic. I had assumed policymakers crafting trade policies should have known and considered human insecurity and potential disparate implications of these policies for these more vulnerable communities. Yet, the longer I followed the issue, the more disappointed I grew at the apparent lack of inclusion. So, after a few years of preparation, supported by funding from the National Security Education Pro-

gram (NSEP) David L. Boren Graduate Fellowship, I went to the Dominican Republic to explore these issues. My sister DeAndra had recently returned from Brazil, living on a settlement while doing field research on the educational strategies within the landless worker's movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)). She left her breastfeeding one-year old at home to join me, then several months into a pregnancy with my second child, in the Dominican Republic. We quickly formed a local research team which included a research methods and statistics professor; (the late) Arelis García, headmaster of Isla Instituto Language School, and several Haitian students studying medicine at a local university. By the time we were to depart the country in late summer of 2007, our core team understood there was much more at stake than a research paper. We understood having heard those whose stories had been pushed to the margins of history that we carried a responsibility to *do something*. The meagerness of our own possessions or resources was a weak excuse. We had made only promises we could keep: to never forget, to carry and amplify their stories, and to give back however and wherever possible. Memory of the eyes and voices of those we had met through our research- agricultural workers and their families in impoverished, isolated rural communities known as *bateyes* held us accountable. We formed the Organization of Dominican Haitian Cooperation (OCDH) with medical students like Lesly Manigat who went on to become doctors working in partnership with batey communities and carrying out cross-border medical support in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, which affected many community residents.

On October 26, 2011, I met Sonia Pierre. She had come to Georgetown University Law Center to speak at the *Conference on Statelessness and the Right to Nationality in the Dominican Republic* about the growing crisis. This crisis would eventually culminate in the Constitutional Tribunal's Sentence 168-13, stripping thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent of their nationality and effectively rendering them stateless, as Sonia direly warned all in attendance that day. She passionately entreated us to take action. We intersected in the atrium after she had stepped out for a smoke break and I had stepped out to calm my three-month-old third child whose voice echoed in the quiet auditorium. She cooed at the baby while I thanked her for her enormous work. My nervous words did not measure up to the gratitude I felt. We chatted a bit and she gave me her card. I returned to the auditorium and was caught up in a lively conversation with a contagiously enthusiastic woman named Nehanda Loiseau (now Julot) at the program's end. We chatted all the way to the bus stop where I dropped her off for her ride back to New York. Little did I know, Nehanda would later help lead a panel discussion at the Transnational Hispaniola II Conference at Rutgers University and would become a co-founder and lead coordinator for the first Border of Lights and develop The Border of Lights Monologues event in New York City. When news of Sonia's untimely death came, five weeks after that fateful Georgetown meeting, I would find her card still in my wallet. It was as if she had said to us, "keep it; it's your turn."

You're going for the meeting after the meeting. The April 12-15, 2012 Transnational Hispaniola II conference brought together activists, scholars, and students passionate about a re-imagined future for the Dominican Republic and Haiti—one that focused on commonality rather than division. My adrenaline took the wheel as the disappointment I felt at having missed all of the multi-day event was overwhelmed by the thought that kept

ringing: *you're going for the meeting after the meeting.* I arrived, with nine-month-old nursing baby in a sling wrap, just after the closing words. Barely breaking my stride, as the throngs were exiting, I walked to the front of the auditorium and stood, looking around expectantly. Seconds later a young woman, whose name I would later learn was Cynthia Carrión, stepped up to the front. She elevated her voice above the chatter to beckon those who might be interested in helping with an idea to honor the victims of the Haitian Massacre: the meeting after the meeting. I found myself in a circle of about ten earnest souls, pegging the name "Border of Lights," to the idea of bringing people to the Massacre River to pay homage to the victims of the 1937 Trujillo-ordered genocidal slaughter of tens of thousands of innocents at the DR-Haiti Border. Those innocents had been killed and brushed aside by history, but we gathered there, vowing to breathe life to their stories and properly lay their memories to rest.

I later discovered I had walked into a circle of leading activists, artists, and scholars. But the small organization DeAndra and I had co-founded with Lesly Manigat in 2007, the Organization of Dominican Haitian Cooperation (OCDH), joined the collaborative effort to continue elevating the plight of Haitian-descendants in the DR. Even my husband Julian was involved in those early days, as it was all hands-on deck: he designed the border of lights logo, t-shirts, fliers, and program for the Border of Lights Monologues. We soon learned that the Border of Lights project was inspired by Julia Alvarez and Michele Wucker, two authors whose work had been pivotally important to us along the way. We had all been leading in our own ways, committed, and had been called together.

We felt the weight of the responsibility to honor the unknown victims of the genocide; unknown to us but well-known to the beloveds left in the wake of their brutal killings. We felt urgency in calling attention to the freedom struggle Sonia Pierre fought so hard for until her untimely death. The mantle of her work fell upon us. We, whose ships had just stopped at different places, at different times were connected by a common legacy within a shared diaspora. We had navigated borders for survival and for thriving. Our people had migrated to strange lands, fleeing terror to build solid homes with our own hands. We knew something of the steady driving forces behind complex manifestations of anti-*them*. So beneath that heavy mantle, we toiled to take another step down the long road of inclusion for Haitian-descendants, for Dominicans of Haitian descent, and for the full embrace of African-descendants of all hues living in the Dominican Republic and beyond. We pushed forward toward greater magnitudes of healing for ourselves, our past, and our future.