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Living Ancestors: An exhibition of portraits and stories of Dominican centenarians

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Abstract

“From their oppressed social condition enslaved women harnessed a revolutionary energy of optimism, confidence and determination which is still evident today in the women whose faces you find in the Living Ancestor portraits. It is this strong spirit of survival in the face of tribulation, poverty and oppression to which we pay tribute.”

These words by Natalie Charles introduce Living Ancestors, an exhibition of ten portraits and stories created to honour the world’s oldest woman, Ma Pambo, 126 years old at the time, and nine other Dominican centenarians. Natalie Charles is a Dominican human rights activist, Caribbean health food innovator, writer and healer who suggested the idea of doing this series of portraits.

Introduction

To meet and spend time in the presence of these extraordinary women elders was a life-changing experience and an immense privilege. Their stories are being lost every day, absent from the histories children learn in school. Already the stories of how their mothers survived the horrors of slavery and the earlier stories of their foremothers' African heritage are almost lost.

The opportunity to make portraits of these women arose in 2001 when I returned to the islands where I had spent almost a decade of my life during the 1980s. I was bringing my son back to the land of his birth and at the airport was a banner announcing that the world's oldest person was a Dominican, Elizabeth Israel, known as Ma Pampo.

During the years I lived in the Caribbean, many of my teachers and mentors were older women to whom I continue to feel connected. When the opportunity arose to do portraits of women elders, it seemed like the most meaningful way to reconnect with the place and strengthen those connections.

The process — meeting the women elders

The process of doing the drawings involved travelling all over the island. It helped a lot that I speak Kweyol fluently and created an intimacy that would not have been there otherwise. The centenarians were willing to have their portraits drawn because they liked the idea of being remembered. They liked knowing that their faces would be seen in other places. They were particularly moved by the idea of their portraits being seen in Africa, as both Ma Bradley and Ma Pampo expressed, it was the only way they would ever go home.

Even though time was so limited, a few things the centenarians seemed to share struck me. They were all very different characters but their courage, humour, faith and warmth were common factors. All had been hard-working, had lived virtually without money, had eaten natural food all their lives and treated ailments with indigenous herbal medicines. All of them held onto whatever autonomy their physical health permitted them despite the challenges of failing vision, lessened mobility, decreased energy and physical strength. None of them lived in old age homes. Often their caretakers were very elderly themselves — daughters or nieces in their eighties. Only one of them was looked after by a man. In their communities, all were remembered for their kindness and willingness to help out anyone in need.

Some were more lucid than others. Ma Pampo's mind was extremely sharp and she joked with the young men who visited that she would marry them. She kept abreast of current events through the radio and quite often the radio presenters would seek her opinion on things that were going on.

The exhibition and what came of it

The Ministry of Culture hosted the exhibition at their headquarters, the Old Mill Cultural Centre in Roseau, and organised and publicised the opening. The exhibition was received with great excitement at the Old Mill, and generated considerable interest across the island and beyond. Old people from a home for the elderly felt a lot younger when they found that there were women twenty or thirty years older than they were still going strong. Younger women questioned why it is that older women are so seldom visible and never seen as beautiful. Most visitors reflected on the social contribution of elders. Many people were taken aback to read that more than half of the centenarians were the great dancers and party girls in their day — the habit of seeing older people as one-dimensional beings who never had wild lives of their own was challenged.

The effect of all this discussion on me was to make me realise that my feminist activism had set out on a new trajectory — one that combined my political and creative passions. In a very real way this exhibition changed my life.

After its encouraging debut in Dominica, *Living Ancestors* has been exhibited in Cape Town, South Africa at Guga S'Thebe Cultural Centre in the township of Langa. It was later exhibited at University of Cape Town Centre for African Studies as part of an exhibition of African women artists, including Berni Searle, Zanele Muholi and Gabi Ngcobo, that was curated for a conference on African Feminisms in 2005. It was also exhibited at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, during the 8th Interdisciplinary Women's World Congress 2002.

Currently *Living Ancestors* is being exhibited in Amsterdam at the NiNsee, a small museum on slavery, until February 1, 2009. From April till the end of July 2009 it will be exhibited at the Museum of London Docklands, the only permanent exhibition on slavery in London. It is also invited to the University of the West Indies.

A creative form of feminist activism.

Since the *Living Ancestors* exhibition, I have continued to initiate travelling exhibitions of portraits accompanied by first-person narratives as a creative way to challenge sexism, racism, classism and homophobia while paying tribute to people who do important and unrecognised work. The personal narratives provide a contextualised understanding of the issue through the experience of those most affected. All these exhibitions are designed and used as advocacy and educational tools.

Last word

In Dominica the longevity phenomenon has attracted the attention of the government and the centenarians are being provided with free electricity, free water, free telephone, free access to health services and the government is also making a meaningful contribution to ensuring that their diets remain the same. The State will also look after their burial.