

## MARIE-DENISE DOUYON

Hello, my name is Marie-Denise Douyon. I am from Haiti. I came to Montreal in 1991.

### LEAVING HAITI

I arrived in Montreal under unusual circumstances. I was 29 years old and I had been arbitrarily arrested in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The arrest took place under the regime of Prosper Avril. A member of the army had been murdered or assassinated. After being arrested, I was with my friend, and the authorities wanted to charge me with the murder. I spent a month in prison in Port-au-Prince. I went through all kinds of trauma because I was beaten. Political action had to be taken at the international level at that point. Action was taken at all levels in France and in the US because the Haitian diaspora is well established in all those countries. I also had family in Canada. After action was taken in Canada, there was an amnesty on February 7<sup>th</sup> and I was released. During this time, there were a lot of arbitrary arrests: journalists were arrested along with politicians. On February 7, prisoners were released. A few weeks later, I decided to come to Montreal, where I had family: my brother, cousins, my sister-in-law and other friends.

### RECONSTRUCTION

During the first few weeks and months after my arrival in Montreal, I focussed on rebuilding myself. I can say that now looking back at it from a distance, but while I was going through this internal rebuilding process, I had to regain my confidence, put on some weight and stabilize my status. I applied for asylum, for political refugee status. I immersed myself in the retrieval of my files and calls to the MP at the time. Finally, I met with a lawyer who submitted my application for refugee status. I also had a cousin who had a painter's studio through some of her connections. She let me use it, allowing me to delve into my creative side and escape a bit through an artistic pursuit in a bid to rebuild myself. Things fell into place, gently. I was not burdened with the concern of having to find a place to stay since I had family here. I was not forced into having to work right away either. Over time, I got my first contact in the illustration world and things progressed from there. Friends in the Haitian community introduced me to other friends. Together, we put a magazine together, which we called "Images Interculturelles". I built a new life for myself, slowly, over time.

### ON ADAPTING

Rebuilding a life somewhere new is quite a challenge. Rebuilding a life, before being able to settle issues of citizenship or demographic identity, is a reconstruction in and of itself. I needed to rebuild my self-confidence, and to mourn my former life by moving

towards a new destination, another road, another place. Then came the challenges of acquiring the right tools for moving on with my life in a comfortable manner.

For the most part I grew up outside of Haiti. I left Haiti when I was four years old. I went to North Africa, first to Algeria then to Casablanca with my parents. I studied in New York and Washington. I think I spent most of adult life in North America. And so my challenges did not include things like: signing up with a bank, getting a bank account, getting an ATM card, renting an apartment. Those things came easily. I think the biggest challenge was in terms of language. And I'm not referring to spoken language. I am Francophone and I'm bilingual, so I can speak English as well. When I say language, I mean having the right tools. Understanding what culturally is codified and what is unspoken. You need to know these things when going for interviews, looking for a job, in responding to others. Even though I knew the language, I did not master the code. For example, you have a toolbox, you have a screwdriver in there, but you do not have a Philips. You have the Robertson and all the others. There are all these small tools like that. People who are born here, through all the civics courses, have all these small tools for understanding the unspoken rules. Each culture has its codes. Invisible codes that we learn as we go along.

#### ART AND IDENTITY

The question of identity is also part of my artistic pursuits as an artist-painter. When I paint, do I tell myself: "There, I've painted something that is African, something that is Haitian or Créole." No, I believe the identity issue, creation – I think (Marcelle) Ferron said it – it is recreation. It is first of all a leisurely activity. After that, there is everything that we have seen and heard. I have travelled a great deal. Over time, I have seen things that come back over and over again. I am drawn to African art. This might be explained by where I am from, but I do not feel obligated to explain this attraction. I often say that Gauguin went to the Pacific to paint and never had to explain himself. Being an artist means following your intuition, your emotions. So mixed in with all that are all your life experiences.

#### ON MULTICULTURALISM

Multiculturalism is an enormous challenge, given all the demographic movements. We live in societies where all kinds of paths meet and cross. There are climate refugees, war refugees. It stands then that looking at multiculturalism without taking into account the geopolitical situation would be a mistake. But the major challenge is bringing everyone to this consensus that evolves and changes. How do we deal with all these new values, new religions, new ways of doing things, these blended identities? It is a question of finding a balance that will enable us to deal with a social consensus for the well-being of everyone.

#### ADVICE FOR NEW ARRIVALS

It might be a bit presumptuous on my part to give advice to people who are just arriving, because we never know under what circumstances people arrive. When speaking to someone who is a war refugee, you do not have the same conversation that you'd have with someone who has to submit an application and who is coming here, let's say, from one company to another and who comes with his family, who already has someone in Canada, who has a house waiting for him in a nice neighbourhood. The circumstances surrounding the departure will have an impact on the type of advice to give. Generally speaking, if we are talking about integration, I would suggest curiosity. Be curious about others. Approach others. Be open. It might be paradoxical, because after suffering a trauma, the first thing you might want is the comfort of your own community. You do not want any other kind of trauma at that point. It can be a complex situation that is difficult to understand. As a general rule, discovering others as they are, as individuals, should be what is most important.

See the individual and not the culture, and it will be a rewarding life experience.

FIN DE LA VIDÉO

*Marie-Denise Douyon works at the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse du Québec in Montreal, where she lives. In 2012-2013, Marie-Denise Douyon directed a documentary entitled Raconte-moi... Haïti et Montréal.*