

*The Paul Farmer Symposium on Global Health Equity*  
*Keynote Address: Haiti's Ability to Inspire, Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis*

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Partners In Health transcript for Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis' keynote address for *The Paul Farmer Symposium on Global Health Equity*. This transcript is off the record.

Sheila Davis:

[02:04:57]

Good afternoon. My name is Sheila Davis and I'm the CEO of Partners in Health, and I have to make a note that those four people sitting in Cambridge are now 18,000 around 11 countries. So we certainly did our job well. I'm very honored and so privileged to introduce our keynote speaker today, Michèle Pierre-Louis. Her keynote address will be *Haiti's Ability to Inspire*.

Michèle was the Prime Minister and the Minister of Justice and Public Security in Haiti from 2008 to November 2009. Her appointment included many, many dedicated roles and advocacy for education, access to information and culture. In 1995, she became the Executive Director of the Knowledge and Freedom Foundation, FOKAL, and the first grant that ZL [Zanmi Lasante] ever received for HIV and Aids came from FOKAL in the early 2000's. Upon leaving her office in 2009, she returned to FOKAL as the President, coordinating post-earthquake response and projects, and she's been selected for numerous roles at the UN over many years. She is a graduate of Queens College in New York, holds honorary doctorates from Saint Michael's College and the University of San Francisco, and was previously resident fellow at the Institute of Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School. She's also professor at the University of Quisqueya in Haiti.

Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis:

[02:06:52]

Thank you, Dr. Davis, for these kind introductory words. Honor! (Audience repeats Honor) Respect! (Audience repeats Respect) That's the way Haitians salute themselves, especially in the rural areas of Haiti. I first want to thank Dr. Vikram Patel, Dr. Ratigan, Dr. Ivers, Dr. Sheila Davis. I was so impressed because my letter of invitation was signed by those four prestigious doctors. But I also want to thank Loune, because Loune is the first one who talked to me about this symposium and invited me. But at the time I didn't know I was going to be keynote speaker. And I want to salute Didi and Paul's brother that I met for the first time. I'm very honored to be here. Really.

I was asked to talk about Haiti's ability to inspire in the world at large today. But I would like to start by telling you about Paul also. A lot has been said, but I will give you my own perspective: how Paul inspired us, how Haiti inspired Paul. In 1995, I was a member of a committee that was in charge of organizing an international conference on Democratic transitions. It was a significant moment for Haiti and we wanted this to be a major event. We had scholars, intellectuals, activists from all over the world, and of course, the young Dr. Paul Farmer was invited. That was the first time I met him and listened to him. He concluded his remarks, after we had a big standing ovation, by saying this, and I quote,



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“We doctors sometimes have the good fortune to cure patients, to alleviate their sufferings. But our medical knowledge alone does not give us the means to explain where this suffering comes from and how it spreads. Doctors, social workers, psychologists, and anthropologists can prepare and publish their case studies, but they won't get to the heart of human suffering until they go beyond the level of individual experience and place each case in its historical, economic, and political context. Go to the heart of human suffering.”

The next year, in 1996, Paul came to see me with Loune at FOKAL, Foundation Connaissance et Liberté, the institution I had created the year before. Polo spoke at length about his new endeavor. He wanted to launch the HIV Equity project and he had a lot of questions. Quote, “Why should the poor not get the best medical treatment possible? If there is a cure for a terrible disease, they should be able to have access to it. And we doctors should be able to save their lives. The poor are dying for lack of human care.” I could see from his analysis that he wanted to get to the heart of human suffering. We gave him the grant. It was the biggest grant from our new foundation. Polo always, always said that our grant opened doors to leveraging much larger financial aid for Zanmi Lasante. Since then, Polo and I met on many occasions in Haiti, where he invited me to speak at the forum he organized every two years in Cange, but also abroad, wherever we were called upon to express our common passion for Haiti.

For the rest of his life, in Haiti, in Peru, in Rwanda, in Malawi and Lesotho, Paul would question the root causes of systemic poverty, taking an interest in people's lives, collecting data that would enable him to better understand the issues facing the poor and suffering communities. Suffering was everywhere in the territories he worked in, creating a geography of fear and misfortune. But it all started in Haiti. Paul noted the main causes of death among the disenfranchised population of Cange: malnutrition, diarrhea, pneumonia, malaria, typhoid, cases of neonatal tetanus and meningitis, and complications during childbirth, all aggravated by malnutrition. These precarious living conditions can only be the consequences of total denial of recognition and to the right to dignity. He grasped the close ties that bind kinship, land, body, and gods in Haiti and the loss of meaning when these ties disintegrate. He also guards the marginalization they suffer at the hands of dictatorships and their local and foreign allies. Thus, an interpretative anthropology of suffering, sensitive to the local and individual consequences of history and its relation to economic and symbolic power, can provide new readings of cultural attitudes elaborated in the face of disease, fear, pain, anger, and brutality.

This interpretative anthropology of suffering draws on ethnographic, historical, epidemiological, political, and economic analysis. Haiti's history is intimately linked to successive forms of globalization. Paul Farmer has written dozens of books and articles in which he shares his philosophy and vision of the world. And as was said earlier, his legacy is immense. His protean experience, which he translated into a system of thought that in turn fed his lines of action, provide us with keys to understanding the systemic and structural aspect of poverty and inequality. This insight informs us about the links between an imaginary world dominated by anti-Black, even anti-Haitian racism, and an ideological construct that sees any gesture, behavior, or speech by this “other,” real or imagined, as signs of aggression deserving to be repressed. More reason to make him or her a victim and accuse the victim.

In the preface of his first book, that was mentioned earlier, *Aids and Accusation*, in the French version, Françoise Héritier made a very straightforward statement in that sense, and I quote, “The moral



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discrimination at the heart of the global judgment of Haitians in the United States leads to blaming the victim and placing the burden of accusation on themselves in a double motivation. Infected because exotic, and exotic because infected. We are therefore dealing with what might be called a process of exoticization, which refers to a guilty strangeness of Haiti expressed with force at the time of the appearance of the HIV/AIDS. What is the basis of this imaginary, which for centuries has constructed representations of Haiti and of its people as superstitious, inept, and incapable of welcoming the benefits of civilization?" And this is exactly what we are fighting against.

Like all of us here, I learned so much from Polo: from his writings, from our conversations, from the exceptional person that he was. And I know we share the common vision and set of values. We were once invited together at a conference at Harvard University, and he called me an organic intellectual. I had never thought of myself as an organic intellectual, but that was Polo. But I tried to understand what he meant in a Gramscian sense. And he meant, and he told me later, the role one plays as a social actor in being able to connect with empathy and care to the most marginalized communities; to salute and uphold their journey, their tremendously hard work, and their sense of pride and dignity; despite all ideological entanglements. This requires knowledge of our own history and of the way it is embedded in the world history. Haiti is in the world.

Next Sunday, on November 18th, we're going to commemorate the unique victory in modern world history of former slaves against Napoleon's army 220 years ago. An incredible and heroic victory should have had great significance, as it exemplified our undeniable claim to humankind by thwarting colonialism, racism, and by rejecting slavery. This only should have been a source of inspiration for all those who were oppressed and understood the real meaning of a free, independent Black republic. A few did. The problem is that we were Black and we still are.

And that was irreconcilable with the spirit of those times, despite a persistent paradox. Countries like France, Great Britain, that invented the Enlightenment, La Lumiere, the Aufklarung; that is the concept... who invented the concept of liberty; of tolerance; of human equality; the role of reasoning, la raison. So many of the philosophers, the thinkers whose work we still study, had shares in the slave trade and found themselves in inextricable dilemmas as to accepting that Blacks are people just like them, and as it is being said today, that Black Lives Matter.

Our revolution and independence are still inspiring events to those who accept to delve into their true historical and symbolic meanings. At the time of the slave insurrection in 1791, close to 70% of the captives had just been bought and deported to the colony as slaves. In 1793, the General Proclamation of Liberty Freedom by a representative of the French Revolution made them free. And by so doing, acknowledged their belonging to humankind. When Napoleon chose to re-establish slavery and send the troops, they were the first to rebel and fight against the French army. They knew that they had reached the level of belonging to humankind. It's only after that the Black officers rallied. What is so inspiring and to find out how captives coming from different parts of Africa, different ethnic groups, speaking different languages, established themselves in this new land and invented a new way of life, creating the new Haitian peasantry.

The captives who were enslaved on the plantation system and deprived of all rights have their own concept of freedom. At the birth of an independent Haiti, they became the Haitian peasants and went



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on to create a mode of life in accordance with the freedom they had just imagined. First, a confraternity among those who suffered, une confraternité de la souffrance, to recognize one another and to live together with a common understanding of dignity, honor, and respect. Second, an express need to be protected by the state against all assault on their new status, which they hardly ever get. Third, a sense that freedom meant never having to work for others ever again on their own land for nothing or very little in return. The rural communities imagine a new political order, capable of offering them the space needed to reconstruct their lives as the communities who had suffered and would never again suffer the racism, the terror, and the constant violence of the plantation system. They wanted to build their own identity in their struggle for equality. And they did for centuries, and are still doing it.

The struggle continues today, and I'm not going to talk about what happened when France forces us with the ransom, and we had to pay 150 million gold francs for recognition of an independent Black republic. And to pay the first annuity, which was 30 million, we had to borrow in France. And this is what historians in Haiti call the double debt. And we got involved in those spirals of debts until today. When the Americans occupied Haiti in 1915, they said, all right, you don't owe any France, you don't owe any German, and you're going to us now. And they collected all the debts, and it took us years until today to pay our debts. We still in the spiral of debts.

The struggle continues today as the situation in Haiti remains very difficult and very complex, as you know. Difficult, because on a personal level, you realize every day how life is fragile. Your own, your family's, your colleagues', your partners'; high insecurity has impacted our mode of functioning. Daily life is disrupted by gang warfare, kidnappings, gang checkpoints, when swarming and shooting at random, paralyzing circulation of produce and people, you're never too sure that you will make it through the day. And this form of stress becomes a constitutive element of your behavior daily. But it is also complex because of the deterioration of the situation. That is, a long process of mismanagement by all the major stakeholders, national and international, and an attitude of neglect towards structural mutations occurring in our country. Since the 1990s, Haiti has received seven UN missions and been submitted to other international intervention that have weakened the capacity of the state to exert its regular functions. They organize and fund elections; they reform the justice system; they train the police through disconnected short term sessions; they propose the implementation of laws; they overlook the fiscal system, education, health, and other sectors. This occurred over a 30-year time span that followed a 30-year long dictatorship propped up by international.

Since the mid-1980s, the population has doubled and the bracket 15 to 45 years of age now represents 65% of the population, to whom very little is offered. Education: that should have been the main focus. I teach at the university, I can tell you: there is so much to be done for youth and children that have an appetite to learn, but in school all are learning so little. That is why we are facing waves of mass migration, the most spectacular one unfolding right now. And this in the face of a state that already suffered from historical weaknesses and has become more and more powerless, inept... inept and in a way corrupt. At the same time, international crime has penetrated all lucrative circuits within the government and among other businesses. The situation worsens since the assassination of the president. Difficult indeed, but we all know that hope is a discipline and a commitment. We Haitians, just like all the people whose ancestors were captured in Africa and for four centuries enslaved on the other side of the Atlantic through the most horrific forced migration of all times, we are the Afro-descendants; the first African diaspora.



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But there is also a new diaspora, a much more recent diaspora formed by men and women from Haiti, but also from other Caribbean countries who were forced to leave their place of birth and establish themselves on other shores, supposedly more secured. Those who went into exile to escape political persecution; those whose living conditions were precarious enough to take the risk to embark on dangerous boat trips; those who went to study abroad and stayed. Their primary destination remains the United States, but they also migrate to Canada, France, Brazil, Chile, and other Caribbean countries, generally forming a labor force much-needed by all those countries.

But there are also many cases of incredible success through hard work, education, community involvement, solidarity against all odds. Quite a few of our diaspora to have acceded to high spheres of accomplishments. In academia: I was very pleased to meet with Harvard President, Madame, Dr. Claudine Gay, just like I was a few months ago to meet with Dr. Reynold Verret, the president of Xavier University in Louisiana. There is also Reginald DesRoches, president of Rice University, and so many others. They are in scientific fields, culture, literature. Everybody knows Edwidge Danticat, Dany Laferrière, James Noël, [inaudible 02:29:21], but also in Haiti, amazing in a country where there is still a high rate of illiteracy, how many of our writers are being nominated for the highest prizes. This gives us pride and it is also a source of inspiration. I could speak of all the doctors, [the prime minister speaks briefly in Haitian Kreyol] who are doing such great jobs abroad, but with their mind and their intelligence still in Haiti.

That is also why Haiti cannot be reduced to bad governance, corruption, disregard of human and women's rights. All this is true, but we refuse the label, "the poorest country of the hemisphere." No. It is true, but Haiti is much more than all this. It is a people that is resisting daily to uphold its dignity; a people that is creative, rich in wisdom and culture; a people that aspired to a better life than in Haiti. But a people that is confronted with the effects of what is just described, but who chose to organize and fight to be free, to make a living, to send kids to school, and at the same time keep an incredible sense of humor. And I think Polo contributed to that sense of humor.

At FOKAL, I work with smallholder farmer communities from Jean-Rabel, Ouanaminthe, Gros-Morne, Fonds-Verrettes, Belladère, Ranquitte, Jacmel, Nippes, Chardonnières. Women and men are working every day to fight against food insecurity; to protect the environment; manage their loan and savings association, la Mutuelle de Solidarité, mostly run by women; and in spite of adverse conditions, keep hoping for better days. Whenever possible, I go myself to visit, like I did recently in Jérémie, Aquin, Cavaillon, Baradères. We are building community centers for organizations, so that they can run themselves and decide what to do, and hope we can raise more funding to do the same for other communities. Real, sustained investment is very rare. Instead, we are offered short-term funding based on increasing bureaucratic conditionalities that cannot be easily met. Haiti is considered a humanitarian case; the humanitarian trap leads and maintains the poverty trap. That is why the holistic approach of the global health equity movement is so vital to our communities; in the way practice, study and research are intertwined in providing care, improving health, and achieving equity for all.

Polo's experience on the ground as a witness to income and social inequality, lack of education and employment, malnutrition, and so many other factors that affect our marginalized population's lives, could only lead to a global vision of health and equity. Health care providers, just like was said



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in the panel earlier, need to interact with communities to address, collectively, issues of healthy food production, eating habits, prevention and curative care, mental health in harmony with culture for the well-being of the people in Haiti. That is possible.

And this need also for our communities of artists, like the smallholder farmers, they get very little support. But continue to create incredible works of art. I'm also board chair of the Le Centre d'Art, the most important institution created in 1944 to promote Haitian art and artists. Artists and artisans [02:34:02 – the prime minister lists many Haitian artists in quick succession], have all suffered from the insecurity. But you should see how they maintain their resistance and continue to create in hope to be joined by others. Communities of smallholder farmers, striving for a better, healthy life in honor and dignity. Communities of artists and artisans that continue to create the most incredible works of art. Women walking miles to sell agricultural produce with a sense of solidarity. Children and youth expressing, daily, an appetite for learning. This is what I find so inspiring in Haiti, and that is what I want to convey to you and to the world tonight. Thank you.