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Dear David Diop

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Dear David Diop

Dear David Diop,

Your poem "Africa" emphasizes the importance of knowing one's ancestral background. You encourage your readers to be proud of their heritage and cultural traditions. However, for many people who live in the twentieth century this may not be possible. Test-tube babies, adopted infants, and orphaned children may never learn of their ancestral backgrounds. Your poem provokes emotions of my own sadness to surface when I think about the thousands of children in the world who grow up not knowing their heritage.

A few days after reading your poem, I bought a Newsweek magazine. As I was scanning it, the article "Whose Eyes are These, Whose Nose?" caught my attention. The story was written by a woman conceived by donor insemination. Her purpose in writing the article was to describe her frustrations from not knowing all of her biological roots. This woman believes that half of her heritage has been erased and lost forever. She also had another reason for writing the article: to widen her search for her biological father whom she knows only as a brown-haired man who attended the University of Tennessee. Mr. Diop, I can sense the pride you hold in knowing your heritage when you say, "Africa of whom my grandmother sings, / On the banks of the distant river/ I have never known you/ But your blood flows in my veins" (4-6).

Unfortunately, most of the time children of donor inseminations are unable to find out who their other biological parent was because the records are closed or eliminated; therefore, the children do not know whose blood flows through their veins.

I know from experience the devastation adopted children may feel from not knowing their natural parents. As I reread your poem "Africa," I was reminded of the painful memories of trying to help my adopted stepson, Craig, search for his natural parents. He began asking questions about his natural parents at a very early age. Because Craig felt a sense of isolation from not knowing his heritage, he became obsessed with his quest to locate his natural parents. In your poem, you describe a son's strong desire to know his ancestral background when you say, "Impetuous son, this tree, young and strong,/ This tree in splendid isolation / Amidst white and faded flowers,/ That is Africa, your Africa" (20-4). However, Craig has been unable to locate his biological parents, because the courts have permanently sealed his adoption records. In desperation, he has contacted an organization to help him find his natural parents. I cannot describe the anguish he has felt while searching for his ancestral background so that he, too, can proudly claim his heritage.

Most often, adopted children grow up questioning who they are and where they came from. They are unable to experience the pride of knowing their ancestral backgrounds. Mr. Diop, you captured their disappointment at not knowing where they came from and their determination to locate their natural parents when you say, "This back that breaks / Under the weight of humiliation / This back trembling with red scars / Saying yes to the whip / under the midday sun." (15-8). Often-times the news of being adopted affects children's sense of identity and belonging.

Many children grow up in orphanages because of war. Much too often, I pick up a newspaper and read about children who become exiled from their own country and live in camps. Often, orphaned children are too young to know their name or their heritage. Living in poverty-stricken conditions, they struggle each day to survive. Many orphaned children do not feel the happiness and pride for their country that your poem describe when you say, "Africa, my Africa, / Africa of proud warriors / In ancestral savannas" (1-3). Children who live in orphanages usually do not know about their ancestral background, their cultural traditions, or their parents.

Mr. Diop, your poem sends a powerful message that conveys the imperative need for people to know their ancestral backgrounds and cultural traditions. Before I read your poem, I took for granted the importance of my heritage. You have taught me to value it, take pride in it, and to be grateful for knowing who I am and where I belong. Because of your poem, I appreciate my heritage much more.

I thank you,

Dianne Jones

*There are only two lasting bequests we can give our children.
One of these is roots; the other, wings.*

Hodding Carter