

THE HAITIAN TIMES

BRIDGING THE GAP

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**Haitian-American trans*
author, artist wins
literature prize**



An Duplan, trans* poet, curator and artist, won the 2022 Whiting Prize for Literature and teaches at Bennington College. Photo by Lyndsy Welgos.

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MILWAUKEE — Over the course of writing his book, [“Blackspace: On the Poetics of an Afrofuture.”](#) An Duplan transitioned from living as a woman to living as a man. This April, “Blackspace” won the [Whiting Prize for Literature](#) — \$50,000 awarded to writers in the process of completing a book-length work of nonfiction that is both researched and imaginatively composed.

“‘Blackspace’ was one of the first times that I even wrote about being trans*,” Duplan said in a phone interview from Vermont, where he lives. “For a while there was no reason for me to write about it.” Then he realized it was to open up the topic for others.

“I didn’t feel like it was relevant,” Duplan said, “and I also didn’t feel quite ready to talk about it. It just took a while.”

He noted trans* — [with an asterisk](#) — acknowledges the word as an umbrella term. It encapsulates a lot of experiences. “It’s not just the quintessential trans narrative of ‘I was a girl. Now, I’m a boy,’” Duplan said. “There’s a bunch of other possibilities.”

Laying a foundation for others

Born in Jacmel, the seaside town about 60 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince, Duplan left Haiti for Boston to live with his grandparents when he was 3 and later to live with his mother, Marie Constant. She served in the American consulate in Washington, D.C. and later as the Ambassador of Haiti to Cuba.

“I was often surrounded by Haitians, but not in Haiti,” said Duplan.

Phaedra Charles, Duplan’s partner, knew of Duplan’s Haitian background as he described his family and experiences growing up.

“He’s described to me the difficulties of being queer and how difficult that was for him culturally,” she said.

“I actually have a pretty queer family,” Duplan said. “We don’t talk about it at all. And depending on where in the family, it’s either just benign or not good. But nowhere, is it like — hurray!”

It's a sentiment others of the [LGBTQ community](#) in Haiti have expressed.

From fourth grade on, Duplan knew he would become an artist, though his family influences were in medicine. Duplan's mother was trained as a medical doctor. She often took him to museums and had an appreciation of art.

"I felt a real sense of kinship with the kind of artistry that was happening [in Jacmel]," Duplan said when he visited Jacmel later in his life.

Later, he attended Vermont's [Bennington College](#) as an undergrad. Duplan has been a faculty member there since last fall.

"We don't have majors," Duplan said. "It's distinctly an interdisciplinary approach to education that I find really engaging and I found as a student and as a teacher."

Before Duplan arrived at his graduate program in creative writing at the [Iowa Writers' Workshop](#), he emailed [Public Space One](#), an artistic experimentation and community center. He introduced the idea of the [Center for Afrofuturist Studies](#), a residency program for artists of color in Iowa City, Iowa.

Kalmia Strong, a colleague who helped found the center, said Duplan put much care and thoughtfulness into the program, now in its fifth year.

"An sent us a document early on that suggested we should buy a house in Iowa City that would include a library for the residency program," she laughed, remembering.

At the time, their center was operating out of a small basement space but Duplan's vision was realized through his determination and efforts.

"He is about supporting this really *ongoing* support structure for Black artists," Strong said.

Pursuing various art forms at once

In Iowa, Duplan's writing took his creative attention. There, he produced "[Take This Stallion](#)," a full-length poetry collection, and "[Mount Carmel and the Blood of Parnassus](#)," a shorter collection.

His continuing artwork in video and performance have been shown at [Flux Factory](#) and the [Institute of Contemporary Art](#) in Los Angeles, among various venues. He has independently curated art projects in cities around the U.S. and in Reykjavik, Iceland. He was a 2017-2019 joint Public Programs Fellow at the [Museum of Modern Art](#) and the [Studio Museum of Harlem](#).

He's well-received by the artistic community, but he's concerned about his creative work's connection to a more general audience.

"All of this is meaningless if we're just being very navel-gazing about it," said Duplan, now 30.

In the last year, Duplan has been concentrating on teaching, which complements his writing and curatorships.

With both personal and artistic pursuits, Duplan aims to push into a more diverse set of subjects and activities and remains open to change.

When he sets out to write a book or a poem, for example, he lets go of the initial objective and reflects on how the project fits with his overall values.

"Perhaps there's some other intention that's possible, based on what's happened," Duplan said, explaining the thought process. Then I re-work the outcome after that moment of glitch or confusion."



BY J.O. HASELHOEF