

OP-ED

# ‘Dazzling diversity’ at Dundalk market | COMMENTARY

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For The Baltimore Sun

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On a drizzly Saturday morning, when spring seemed to have hit the “pause” button and the TV news was just as dreary, a friend and I drove to Dundalk. We thought we’d mosey around the Plaza Flea Market, maybe get some face masks, light bulbs, new sweatpants. What we found instead was dazzling diversity.

The [Plaza Flea Market’s logo](#) is a silhouetted farmer driving an Amish-style buggy. The design may seem odd for a place selling everything from mattresses to plaster trolls in Baltimore Ravens regalia, but I assure you that it is perfectly appropriate. About a fifth of the market’s indoor space is occupied by Amish vendors who come from the Harrisburg area. To enter the market’s Amish side is to enter diversity on steroids. There, dewy faced young girls in black aprons over simple dresses serve a mulligan stew of humanity with ready smiles. Want a marbled chuck roast? It’s yours. How about buckwheat pancake mix? Quince jam? Fried chicken livers? Barbecued ribs? From the heart healthy to the cardio-calamitous, all you have to do is ask. Beside a tub of homemade cottage cheese, I spied a concoction of chocolate pudding, cookie crumbles and whipped crème. Which do you think I chose?



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But it wasn't the variety of food that stunned me; it was the variety of the customers. That was apparent even in the parking lot. My friend nosed his 16-year-old Honda into a space behind a brand-new Lexus LC 500. The price

of the Lexus? Upward of \$90,000, about 31 times the value of my friend's car. Did anyone notice? They did not (except maybe me).

Rich and poor, young and old, Black and white, the market caters to every taste. As I ordered some ham hocks, I watched a middle-aged Black man buy a steak from a young girl wearing a starched, white "kapp." As far as I could tell, those two people had almost nothing in common: not their ages, not their genders, not their races. Not even the centuries they live in. The man might have been the owner of that Lexus, with its 493-horsepower engine, while the girl still lives in the era of one-horse buggies.

And yet, there they were on a dreary Saturday morning, in a mutually satisfactory exchange, a simple transaction that appeared unremarkable in every way. And it was, but only because it transpired under the auspices of a government and society where transactions between disparate individuals are the norm.

Such is not always the case elsewhere. I have shopped in markets in Istanbul, Paris and Reykjavik. I have seen the merchants' suspicious eyes fasten on someone in African garb, and I've watched gypsy women and their children beg in the rain because they weren't allowed under a market's roof. And I've been scammed. Somehow a green coat I bought in Florence metamorphosed from genuine suede into polyester by the time I got it home. But that man buying his steak in Dundalk could be reasonably certain that the cut he chose was the one he paid for.

I am not naive; I know the simple interaction I witnessed does not signal that America has somehow attained a state of fellow feeling. Far from it. For centuries, under a comforting myth of national exceptionalism, we've buried the truth: America's foundation is mortared with the bones of Black people. But, now the TV news, dreary though it may be, routinely shows Black men being killed by those sworn to protect them, and our comforting myth is exposed for the threadbare rag it has been all along. If all her citizens are to trust that America's justice is meted out in equal measure, the full weight of her crime be acknowledged. The time has come.

Still, I did witness a simple exchange between two very unlike people and was buoyed by what I saw. I had come to the market, I now realize, because I was hungry for hope. I left with ham hocks, homemade noodles and oversized sunglasses with pearl earpieces. And the vision of a possible America. On a drizzly Saturday morning, I had come to Dundalk. And Dundalk did not disappoint.

*Patricia Schultheis is the author of “Baltimore’s Lexington Market,” an award winning collection of short stories about Baltimore titled St. Bart’s Way, and of “A Balanced Life,” a memoir published by All Things That Matter Press in 2018. She can be reached at [bpschult@yahoo.com](mailto:bpschult@yahoo.com)*