A Liminal Space: Between Nostalgia and Assimilation

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Abstract

In times of happiness I write. In times of stress I write. Writing has always been my place of refuge. My journey as black, Muslim, and immigrant in the United States has given me ample opportunity to write. This is an innovative work of autobiographical creative nonfiction that is structured as reflections followed by poems. My intent is to give reflective details of my life as an "Other," and complement it with original poems and a short story. This thesis is intended as a vignette through which I aim to show a view of my life experiences. As much as I would like to think that this work is truly innovative and one-of-a-kind, several books and authors had already explored multi-cultural identities, the search and yearning for a place to call home, and the complexities of assimilation/nostalgia—which were my goals at the onset of this book.

Tunisian-American poet Leila Chatti is one such author. In her collection of poems titled *Tunsiya/Amrikiya,* she details a tapestry of rich threads of a world made of both American and Tunisian experiences. In an interview about her book, she states that she "live[s] in a perpetual state of longing…I have two languages, two cultures, two parent faith, and they all get jumbled up." This collection is intended to reflect that exact same sentiment. The aim is to point out that the words "nostalgia" and "assimilation" are incompatible concepts. For immigrants like myself, the need to sentimentalize and yearn for the happiness of home is a constant occurrence. The problem is, nostalgic reminisce of a former place or time stands in sharp contrast to the concept of assimilation, which is

defined as, conforming to the customs and attitudes of a nation. You cannot have both; therefore, you are condemned to choose a life of either constant melancholy or that of a "real American," whatever that means. During this journey, back home, I lost two sisters, a brother, countless relatives, and missed bonding with my aging parents. In America, I encountered and combated racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. This is my story in verse and prose.

Dedicated to:

Mohamed, Bintu, & Adama;

The ones who didn't make it

Death

In the wake of an arduous journey
the dead refuse to rest.
With gaggled eyes and bated breath,
tired legs, and empty heart,
they slowly amble forth towards heaven
with arms outstretched yearning for pittance.
Sad and broken
only to discover that the stones are not mortar but dust.
A glimpse of life unfulfilled
and silent.

Nostalgia

Oh mighty gods of my clan
what crime did I commit that I should be banned?
My mother's face I am forbidden to see
and near my tribesmen
I am prohibited to be.
Strange ways and traditions
I am condemned to observe,
my local practices and customs
I cannot preserve.
Dreams of palm-trees and sandy beaches
float in my head,
but traffic jams and snowstorms
are what I get instead.
Peanut butter soup, Kola nuts, and Palm wine
are all I crave,
from Africa, beautiful Africa,
home of the brave.

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In The Beginning

I was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Located in West Africa, Sierra Leone is bordered by Guinea to the Northeast, Liberia to the Southeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the Southwest. The story goes that in 1462, Portuguese explorer Pedro De Sintra sailed across the hills of what is now the Freetown harbor in the middle of the raining season. He heard thunder reverberating from the mountains and mistaken them for roaring lions, he naturally named the land, *Serra Lyoa* (Lion Mountains). Like Christopher Columbus, he "discovered" a land that was already inhabited for over 2,500 years. Sintra's discovery was quickly followed by Portuguese fortified trading posts. The Dutch and the French came next, building heavily armed trading posts to hold African slaves who were brought in from the interior. Not to be outdone, the British, in 1562, initiated the *Transatlantic Slave Trade*. This was an innovative trading process whereby they shipped goods to the West Coast of Africa to be exchanged for slaves who were then taken to the West Indies and sold for sugar, rum, and other commodities. Finally, these goods were shipped back to England.

The city of Freetown has a more interesting history. After the American Civil War ended in 1865, thousands of newly freed slaves were relocated to Nova Scotia in the Canadian province, the Caribbean Colonies, and London. These freed slaves, and slaves

that were captured onboard slave ships (*recaptives*), were sent to a settlement found in Sierra Leone by the British Crown. This mixed batch of freed blacks from America, Maroons from the Caribbean, and British blacks, were so elated that they were free and could settle down on a place they could call their own, that they named the new settlement Freetown. I was born and raised on the East End of Freetown.

My name is Haroun Rashid Noah Koroma, I am the son of Alhaji Abdul-Badr Noah Koroma; a proud Mandingo man, who is the son of Alhaji Alieu Kundoh Koroma; paramount chief of the Mandingo tribe. I am also the son of Haja Marie Leah Deen, daughter of Alhaji Issa Deen, who was the last lineage of griots of my tribe. My mother can trace her family tree for generations, spanning several countries including Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, and The Gambia. My father, on the other hand, is a direct descendant of the first batch of *recaptives* they were settled in Freetown. His great grandfather was captured as a slave in Gambia, put on a ship bound for the New World, but was recaptured by the British Navy and brought to Freetown. So, it was a taste of bitter irony that my father decided to send me to attend school in America; a land where his forefather was almost enslaved.

Even though it concerned my life, the decision to leave my childhood land was not made by me; I was too young to participate in such a grave and important decision. In retrospect, if my input were allowed, I would have voted no. It was decided, by my father, that the best path to a better education for me was in America. Growing up, I was always the smartest student in my class and I showed an insatiable hunger for reading. By my teenage years, I had read all the books in my town's small library. My next haunt was the American embassy as they had an extensive array of books and magazines. My

favorite was *Reader's Digest*. Every day after school I trudged up the hill to the American Embassy and devoured stories and information about American life, society, culture, and government. I read about American history, the Civil War and the War of Independence. I lost myself in funny and insightful stories of the average American and was amazed at their audacity to question authority and their concept of "pursuit of happiness," which is entrenched in the American constitution. I remember debates with my friends about the American Rule of Law, and the systems of checks and balances. I was so enamored by the visage of America that I proudly proclaimed to my classmate that what our young African republic needed was an American type of democracy; a government "of the people, by the people [and] for the people." My love and admiration for America was forged in those early years. Although I did not want to leave the safety and innocence of my family and small town, I was excited to experience the life of freedom, opportunity, and security that America promises.

My father had plans for my life. He was an educated African (a rarity at that time), and so he believed in the power of education. He was always telling his children that education was the ultimate weapon Africans could use to drive the English out of the continent. He was the first group of Africans that were sent to England to study political science and governmental policies: an attempt by the English colonialists to copy what the French colonialists were doing in the neighboring West African regions. The idea was that when enough Africans were trained to govern the continent, the colonies will then be left in their safe and capable hands—but the allure of gold, diamonds, and other minerals were too great so the English stayed for a few more decades. My father came back from England and took his role as the headmaster of the local high school.

Unfortunately, he did not adjust well upon his return. In England he learned, for the first time, about European exploitation of the continent, and the brutality and inhumanity of the *Transatlantic Slave Trade*. As an educated African, he was confused about his role and his conflicted feelings. He felt he was losing his African identity and his cultural practices because the colonial masters frowned upon their newly minted "English-African" performing "barbaric and satanic" rituals. His first act of rebellion was marrying my mother. As an educated man, a pillar of the society, and a representative of the image the English wanted to project of a "civilized" African, he was expected to marry an educated woman, preferably one of the Sunday school Christian teachers. Instead, my father had other plans; he felt that he needed a woman that represented the culture of the country. He wanted a woman who was steeped in the practices and conventions of the land, so he chose my mother who was a dark-skinned uneducated woman from one of the surrounding villages. She was the daughter of a native doctor and a griot who taught her the art of diagnosing illnesses and producing herbs from roots and plants to heal diseases and ailments such as diabetes or cancer.

When my mother was told about the decision to send me away she was distraught. Unfortunately, ours was a patriarchal society so she was not included in the decision either. Only my father and his brothers weighed in because women were not allowed to participate in such weighty matter, as they were deemed "too emotional." She cried and complained because she thought it unwise for a young boy to leave his family and move so far away. For her, America was a decadent land as she had heard stories about drugs, gangs, and crimes. Most of all, she was worried that I will lose my sense of community, respect, and family. She thought that I was not yet sufficiently trained on the importance

of *ajo*: the ability to be affable, kind, and open to others, and *Akeeh:* the belief in retributive justice. For us Africans, these two concepts are integral parts of our culture. The importance to coexist with others, respect for our native land, and reverence for our parents, elders, culture, society, and authority, are taught at home, school, and out in the community. We truly believe that it indeed takes a village to raise a child. However, my mother knew she was fighting a losing battle because when the men decided on matters of the family it became law. Months before I was set to depart, she sat me down and gave me pieces of advice and told me stories about my family and descendants. Her most profound advice was for me to be proud of my heritage, so she told me stories about our family tree, her journey, and her experiences with my brothers and sisters through the good and the bad times. On evenings after supper, I sat at her feet and she told me what made her happy—for my brothers and sisters to be at peace with each other, and what we ought to do to make us good and moral beings—to follow the golden rule. She told me about relatives and friends, ancestors and enemies, and she amazed me with her strength, knowledge, and resilience.

Although I was too old for children's stories, she told me the tales that are told at campfires during cold *harmattan* nights. With a glint in her eye, she asked, "Do you know why the spider has a tiny waist?" Or "Why does tortoise have cracked shells?" Or my favorite, "Why are mosquitoes always buzzing around our ears?" She daftly told these stories intermingled with sage advices, sprinkled with morality, and ancestral history that were supposed to make me proud of my people. To this day, whenever I am sad, insecure, or just nostalgic, when I am tempted to act contrary to how I was raised, or

I am in an ethical or moral quandary, those days with my mother are my most vivid memories, and I use them as guides to help me make the right decisions.

Home

Once I saw a little boy sitting on an African beach.
He had a trance-like look on his face,
lost to the world.
He seemed mesmerized at the way the sky and the water
merged seamlessly and blend
into a beautiful color of part azure and part magenta.
I wondered what he was thinking,
life, love, and travel maybe.
Was he thinking about leaving the beautiful shores,
traveling to foreign lands and settling down?
Or was he contemplating adventures and wonderment?

I wanted to go up to him and shake him off his blissful slumber.
Rouse him from his careless dream
and tell him my story.
About shackled hearts collecting dust in webbed cupboards.
About congealed blood attracting flies.
About broken bodies and hung carcasses.
About missed dreams and melancholies,
and the weight of solitude on slender shoulders.
Stay little boy stay
my heart screamed.

The world is not kind to little African children who stray from the pack.

They devour their young,
castrate their weak.
They defile innocent dreams,
fetishize black bodies,
mutilate and maim,
and use their cadavers for sport.
Go home child and cling to your mother,
play with your little brother,
stay awake at night
and peek at the brilliant spectacle of lights
that is the African skies.

Minnesota: Land of 10,000 Lakes

My first State of residence in America was Minnesota. Imagine the environmental and cultural shock of a young boy ripped from a small communal settlement in Africa where the average temperature is about 85 degrees, and taken to the Upper Midwestern region of the United States, where the snow is knee-high, and the lakes are frozen. That was how I happened to be in Minnesota on the morning of September 11th 2001. As the drama of the planes hitting the Twin Towers unfolded, I sat with a group of friends, and family members watching it on television. Selfishly, my first thought was about the hijackers and not the thousands of innocent victims that died that day. I silently prayed for the hijackers to be revealed as white American Christian men, not immigrants, blacks, or Muslims. I knew then, when they were discovered to be Arabs and Muslims that the United States, as I knew it, would forever change. I had lived in Minnesota for three years before the terrorists attack on September 11th, and despite a few instances of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, I found Minnesotans to be friendly and open-minded. There is an expression in the Midwest that refers to the attitude of Minnesotan as *Minnesota Nice.* This can best be described as a cold, and detached kind of friendliness. The stereotypical modus operandi of people from Minnesota is to be courteous, reserved, and mild-mannered. Minnesotans would smile, greet strangers and invite them to their homes, but you get a feeling that you don't really know them.

Our next-door neighbor, a veteran, was a nice old man. He and his lovely wife always invited us over for Sunday dinners, Thanksgiving, and Christmas celebrations. He would proudly introduce us to his friends as immigrants from Africa, and they would ask us about our homeland, what kind of food we ate, and even tried our local cuisine. I had school friends whom I would go outings with on weekends, and neighborhood friends I played video games with. One of my friend's parents would drop us off at the Mall of America on weekends and we would spend the entire day roaming the mall, watching movies, and playing games at the arcade. The first sign that things had changed after the terrorists' attack on September 11th was when our nice and friendly neighbor pointed out that we were the only house in our street that was not flying the American flag. He offered to purchase one for us if we couldn't afford it, but we respectfully declined. It wasn't that we weren't proud of supporting this great country, or that we weren't sympathetic to the sorrow and suffering Americans were going through, it was that the obscene display of patriotism made us felt uncomfortable, and left out. For outsiders, like immigrants, *American Patriotism* and *American Exceptionalism* do not mean the same as they do to native-born Americans.

These words are thrown at foreigners to make them feel excluded and scared. For some Americans, patriotism means, " I love my country and YOU don't." When defined this way, the call for patriotism is not to bring people together, rather, it is to rally "true believers" so that they can attack those who do not loudly proclaim their love for America. It is not a silent and somber love of country, but rather a loud display of pride that is intended to shame others who do not celebrate America as they do; ergo, they must hate America. The same can be said of the term *American Exceptionalism*. In its pure

form, the term indicates America's uniqueness in its democratic ideals and personal liberty. But, when used in its hyperbolic form towards immigrants, it is meant to describe the superiority of America, compared to the countries immigrants are from, you know, "shithole countries."

A few days after we declined his offer, we found out that our friendly neighbor wasn't so friendly anymore. He canceled our regularly scheduled cookout that weekend and started driving by without saying hello. We noticed that the other neighbors were also withdrawn and when my friends at school were driven to the mall without me, we decided it was prudent to purchase and hang the American flag, which we did. The freedom and liberty that Americans proclaim is sometimes not practiced by immigrants because it could be construed as ungrateful acts and arrogance. Immigrants are not allowed to criticize the country and its practices without being considered unpatriotic. As many times that I encountered racism and xenophobia in America, my love for the country never wavered. I believe in the American ideology, its citizens, and their capacity to be good and decent people.

I am reminded about my readings of *slave narratives* and the question on why slaves believed in Christianity even when they could clearly see that their cruel masters used the Bible and its teachings to subjugate and torture them. The answer is that slaves believed in the original teachings and promises of the Bible. They understood that the slave masters were using a profane interpretation of the scriptures for their own pleasures and gains. When I am confronted with a chant of "U.S.A.," used to drown out my pain and shatter my humanity, I remind myself that the ideal of America is pure. I choose to believe that although some of the founding fathers were slave owners, their decree that

"All men are created equal" was brought forth from a moral and ethical place, and that these applications of racism are also profane interpretation of these ideals.

The Things WE Carry

1

I walk into the monstrosity
with my eyes peeled,
my head on a swivel
from side-to-side
bobbing and weaving
watching where I step.
Booby-traps all over from the left and the right.
I push my cart through
aware that I am in enemy territory.
Pussyfooting, cautious, and with trepidation
I step in the minefield,
reminding myself,
no eye contacts,
no hellos,
no smiles.
Just trudge through, head down.

11

I almost bump into a cart pushed by a nice white lady
who looks up half smiling until she sees me
glares and snarls.
Damn immigrants, she mutters.

I plow on, heading towards the meat section.
Bread in aisle two,
milk in aisle four.
Then I see her,
every black man's worst nightmare;
a friendly, blonde, five-year-old white girl.
The one who always smiles and says *hello* to everyone,
you know,
The one who really does not see color.
I instinctively engage in evasive maneuver
(I trained for this)
camouflage myself behind the fresh fruit and vegetable stand.
Sharp turn through aisle five--frozen food,
grab two cans of green beans
and scramble towards checkout.

111

I join the queue,
exactly three feet from the man in front of me.
(I trained for this)
He glances around, suspiciously.
Careful not to spook him,
money in hand, always cash, never credit card;
see, no food stamps, I am not spending your tax money,
I reassure him, telepathically.
Cashier rings me up and asks,
would you like your receipt?
Yes ma'am I respectfully reply.
I exit with receipt in my hand
held high in plain sight,

like a Scarlet Letter,

the symbol of my shame.

Or is it your shame?

1V

In my vehicle I let out a loud sigh of relief.

Then say a quick prayer

to God

to Allah

to Jesus

to Muhammad

to Ogun, the great African god of my tribe,

and to my ancestors

that I make it home

safely.

My Father

My father, Alhaji Abdul Bad'r Noah Koroma, is a complicated man. He was a product of an experiment by the British colonialist to produce a higher functioning African man. According to them, an African needs to be civilized in mannerism, speech, faith, and culture. From an early age, he was hand-picked by his catholic priest school teachers to be trained as the new face of what an educated, cultured, Christian, African man ought to be. Although he was raised a Muslim, the Catholic missionaries converted him to Christianity and changed his African name from Koroma to Noah. After secondary school, he was sent to a private college in England to be trained as a government official and educator. Like me, but from a different era and circumstances, my father straddled a liminal space between African cultural practices and beliefs, and Christianity, English mannerism and comportment. He was neither an ardent believer in the British establishment, nor was he comfortable in the rituals of African practices. I remember vividly how distinctly my father's behavior oscillated when he was in the presence of his white coworkers and when he was around his African family and friends. In his professional life, he was always acutely aware that he carried the mantle of the benchmark of the perfect African man, and he wore that responsibility heavily. His

greatest fear was for the white man to think less of him or his family because of some cultural faux pas in etiquette, manners, or conduct.

The first time I read August Wilson's *Fences*, the relationship between Troy (father), and Cory (son), reminds me of the relationship between my father and me. In one of the iconic scenes, Cory asks his father why he doesn't like him, and Troy relied:

> Like you? I go out of here every morning bust my butt putting up with them crackers every day cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw. It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house, sleep your behind on my bedclothes, fill your belly up with my food, cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you!...I ain't got to like you...Don't you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. (Fences)

My father was never the cuddling type; he was not a man who wasted platitudes and filial affection. He was curt and he demanded respect. Like Troy, his job, as he saw it, was to provide food, shelter, and security for his children, not an outward profession of love and tenderness. He believed in the adage "spare the rod and spoil the child," and he used the whip as a deterrent so that his children would obey his strict rules and adhere to the expectations of a respectable family. I spent my entire childhood deathly afraid of my father. The only thing that made him happy was a good report card from school, so I spent a good deal of my time in my room studying. He expected good grades and deportment from his children or they would feel the pain of the whip. I grew up having

the best grades in all of my classes because not only did I aim to please my father, but because I was afraid of him. I was the perfect child, respectful, smart, and courteous.

People always remarked that I look exactly like my father when he was younger, and that we have the same personality, I believe that was the reason why we had such a turbulent relationship. Although our relationship was tempestuous in the early years, my father and I patched it up and bonded later in life. He turned ninety-one years old this year, and he is getting to a stage where he experiences lapse in his memories. I love spending time with him and when I do, I ask him about his life, his loves, and his regrets. Although he is suffering from early stages of dementia, he has vivid memories of his life and relishes telling me about it. While relating his history to me, I found out that he was an excellent scholar, and that he played cricket and football in school and at the professional level. He confessed to me that he regretted giving up on his religion and culture when he was a younger man. Although he went back to using his African name, Koroma, and encourages his children to do the same, he felt that he missed out on a pivotal period of his life. He reverted back to the Muslim religion and immersed himself into the African culture. To make up for lost time, my father contested and won the Mandingo chieftaincy, just like his father did decades earlier. He became a titled elder, a spokesman, and a representative for his tribe. He was the chief negotiator in many of the land, tax, and power disputes between his people and the British. According to his people, there was no one better qualified to lead them against the British because he was part of both communities. They trusted him to advocate for them because, for years, he stood on the threshold between both worlds.

Conversation With My Father

I sit across from my father
and stare at my future self.
Sunken cheekbones and high forehead.
Dome dotted with wisps of grey hairs.
Octogenarian rheumy eyes
hiding flicker of knowledge and mirth.
Arthritic knuckles and saggy skin,
yet regal, proud, and commanding.
How are you doing dad?
Vacant cloudy eyes reflect at me.
Knotted brows attempting to recall
and with hint of memory,
smiles and mutters,
I'm proud of you son.
As I reach for him,
holding on for dear life.
Weeping.

My Mother

Like a mother hen, my mother was always fussing, and worried about her children's welfare. At the first sign of any illness, she would wrap us up in potions, muds, clays, medicinal leaves, and healing oils. She spent sleepless nights worrying about evil spells, demons, witchcrafts, and death. The fear that someone, because of jealousy or maleficence would hurt her children was what fuels my mother's obsession. Unfortunately, she couldn't divulge these trepidations to my father because he thought they were irrational fears based on illiteracy. As an educated man, my father believed that there were always rational explanations for every phenomenon. Magic potions, animal sacrifices, *amulets,* and waist beads, usually used to wade off evil spells, were, according to him, frivolous undertakings that belie a lack of understanding of how the universe works. According to my father, if science and philosophy couldn't explain something, they do not exist.

Perhaps my mother understood these things better because of her background and experiences. My maternal grandfather was not only a *griot*, but also a renowned medicine man. Using herbs, plants, portions, and Arabic inscriptions, he could cure almost any ailment, from cancer to the common cold. As a child, my grandfather taught my mother the secrets of the forest. Although he would have preferred to pass these secrets to a son,

he had no choice because he only had daughters. As the eldest child, my mother was groomed from an early age to be an *Obeah.* My parents were an unlikely pair; my father was an educated man who was trained in English etiquette and behaviors by English and Irish Catholic schoolmasters, and by British colonial administrators. My mother, on the other hand, never attended formal school, but was trained in traditional and cultural practices and beliefs. As children, we would go to our father for help in schoolwork, Christian dogma, and explanations of ideas that were taught at our catholic schools, but when faced with practical life situations, we ran to our mother for help.

As confusing as these times were, we had a distinct understanding on how these things work. A perfect example was how we navigate the practice and concept of religion as my mother was a practicing Muslim while my father was a Christian convert. My father, because of his relative wealth and professional position, had access and opportunity to send his children to the best schools, which happened to be catholic schools. That was how my sisters were sent to Saint Mary's Convent School, and my brothers and I, to Saint Edward's Primary and Secondary Schools. During the day, we were taught the Bible and the Catechism at school, but when we got home, my mother would encourage us to perform the Muslim evening prayers. I learned about the Christian faith and the Bible at my catholic school Mondays through Fridays, and on Sundays, we went to the Arabic school to learn the Arabic alphabet and the *Quran.* This experience gave me a thorough understanding of the *Abrahamic religions*, particularly their similarities and differences. Another example is the dilemma of which parent we go to when we became ill. My father would take us to the doctor to get shots, x-rays, and medication, while our

mother would use her knowledge of herbal medicine, or take us to nearest local medicine man.

When I was seven years old, I discovered a mysterious discoloration on my leg. I showed it to my mother and she was convinced that someone was trying to harm me. She got very distraught and waited for my father to go to work, and then took me to the local medicine man. I still remember that experience. The room was dark and smoky, and smelled of herbs and potions, and the medicine man was covered with necklaces, armbands, ankle bands and waistbands. He was speaking in tongues and reciting incantations that were supposed to expel the evil spirit that had consumed me. He mixed and applied a foul smelling ointment on the discoloration, which was intended to reverse the spell and return my leg to its original color. When that didn't work, he tried to sweat it out of me by locking me up in a dark hot room that contained a smoking pot that was emanating smoke and odor of medicinal leaves and tree barks. Eventually, he gave me a potion to drink that was so nauseating that I vomited. Without missing a beat, he started chanting and proclaimed the evil spell was broken. We went home and my mother made me promised never to tell my father—I still have the discoloration on my leg.

As much as my mother deferred to my father when it comes to seemingly important things, she was unmistakably the head of the household. She decided the finances, what kind of food is prepared, how the children behaved, how they spent their time, and who is allowed to visit the house. When someone needed an audience with my father, usually for financial help and advice, they had to go through my mother. She made sure requests were not for frivolous things, and that they were made for amounts and things that father could afford and provide. The reason she had to be sure the requests are reasonable was

because when they are not, father could lose face if he declined or couldn't help. In our culture, losing face is something that must be avoided at all cost; we believe and practice the concept of *noblesse oblige*. We lived in a society of rules and expectations. Gender roles, social etiquettes, and charity of the upper class were unspoken rules that must be followed. As children, we were in awe of how our mother effortlessly balanced these roles.

Our goal, growing up, was to make mother happy, because when mother is angry, the entire house was miserable. Either through eerie silences or the sounds of loud banging pots and pans, we could sense the mood of mother and then acted accordingly. The things that made mother happy were her children doing well in school, acting as well-behaved children, and when we are at peace with our brothers and sisters. For a small woman, she was about five feet tall; my mother seemed to have Herculean strength and patience. Even when she lost two daughters to cancer, and a son, she remained steadfast and kept her faith. She had numerous pains, heartaches, and sorrow, but through it all, she stayed formidable and strong. Even at present, she worries about me everyday, wondering if I am safe, happy, and eating right. Every year, I make an annual pilgrimage back home to sit at my mother's feet and listen to her stories. These stories help me understand who I am. I have a complete perception of who I am from her telling me about my family tree, her journey through life, and her relationship with her tribe, community, and the world. I am acutely aware that immigrating to the United States meant missing valuable time with her. I am also aware that I need to rekindle our relationship, and that I wasn't there when she needed me the most.

For us Africans, mother *is* supreme. She is named for the earth; mother earth. She is the life-giver, the one who sustains life, and the center of our universe. Where I am from, it is considered blasphemous to raise your voice, strike, or disobey your mother. The last thing you would like to happen to you, according to African culture, is for mother; the personification of the female deity, to be angry with you. She alone controls fertility in the womb and the earth: children are not conceived and the earth does not yield food when mother is unhappy or angry.

When Mother is Angry

Like *Hallelujah* rapturing in holy places,
it erupts in an explosion of utterance.
Mother was wrong!
Blasphemy!
Hush your mouth child
the spirits are listening.
The *furies* will unleash
seven years of bad luck and pestilence.
Rats will eat out your eyes.
Your ears will be torn apart,
and your teeth will be ground to dust.
Remember, the gods have spoken
Nneka--Mother is Supreme.
Life makes sense when, like shadows,
we lurk behind our mothers' *lappa*.
Our paths are paved with benevolence
and the sacrifices made to our ancestral spirits.

Our favorite deities cannot protect us
when mother is angry.
Even in our derelict state,
while looking for worms underneath rocks,
climbing trees, scrape knees,
mud wrestling, and angst,
all folders for the anger of mother,
we worry about our mothers
who in return, worry about us.

My Grandfather

My maternal grandfather, Alhaji Alieu Kundoh Koroma, was a griot. He was not a chief, as he had no political power, he was not a priest as he had no divine power, and he was not a magistrate, as he had no legal power. Yet, my grandfather was the most important and powerful man in the community because he had knowledge; in African culture, knowledge trumps everything else. The power and adoration of the griot in African culture have no corresponding concept to anything in the Western world. The combination of talents that includes a philosopher, historian, storyteller, poet, entertainer, musician, and a genealogist that a griot possesses, is an affirmation to the uniqueness of the role. Griots are important to the cultural and social life of the African society. Their main role was to entertain and inform by using mythical stories of gods, spirits, kings, queens, warriors, and heroes. Some of these stories had moral messages that are intended to teach, or entertain, while others have explanations for natural phenomena like the weather, and animal characteristics. A griot can weave creation stories intermingled with

biographical excerpts and tribal history, to inform their people about the importance of unity or the greatness of a family. My grandfather took his role as a professional oral historian very seriously. He was aware that griot was an important art form, and that orally passing along the history and cultural practices of his people was a sacred mantle that had to be carried out with dignity and care.

The weekends I spent with my grandfather were memorable ones. I was assured of moments of excitement and indelible memories whenever I witness my grandfather's performances. He would wake up early in the morning to compose songs and work on his historical knowledge. Depending on what type of ceremony (wedding, funeral, naming ceremony, or honor bestowment) he was hired for, he would choose his ceremonial gown and musical instruments accordingly. Since his presentations were done orally, my grandfather would practice his knowledge of recounting the family tree and intimate information of his clients. He had an eidetic memory; he could remember the lineage and details of each family member of every person in town. Praise singing is considered a sacred endeavor, as there are spiritual components to it, so my grandfather would spend hours secluded in his personal shrine conversing with his ancestral spirits and guides. As children, we were warned never to enter his shrine and to avoid disturbing him when he was in preparation.

On the day of the ceremony, I would serve as his personal assistant and tasked with carrying his musical instruments, and outfits. I would sit transfixed at my vantage spot and observe my grandfather captivate and transform a crowd. He would take them on an emotional journey of warriors, kings, and gods, and would eventually end in a catharsis of pride and dignity. Like watching a movie, I clearly saw the faces in the crowd, and felt

their excitement and moods. What I wanted to be, when I was a child, was to be like my grandfather and become a griot. I admired the way he moved people's emotion and inform them in such a way that they are impacted by his words. Unfortunately, although it is still performed locally to this day, the practice was officially outlawed by the arrival of the British colonialists. So, I settled on the idea of becoming a teacher.

From 1808 to 1961, Sierra Leone was a British colony. It became independent from Britain on April 27th 1961. One of the first things the English colonizers did in Africa was to discourage Africans from practicing their ancestral religions, and local practices. British colonization in Africa was intended to transform African society to English society. Any action that was considered contrary to Britain's established norms was stamped out. The emphases of conversion in the two most important aspects of British colonial practices were religion and government. According to them, to civilize the Africans, we needed to be converted to Christianity, which means eliminating our gods and stopping us from partaking in our rituals. In government, the British introduced democracy and series of taxes and reforms that were intended to seize and control our mineral resources--in the case of Sierra Leone, the land had abundant amount of iron ore deposits and diamonds. The criminalization of local practices meant my grandfather was a member one of the last groups of griots to practice their art. Not long after his death, the practice of praise singing was frowned upon and eventually faded out. Currently, it is only practiced in remote areas of the country.

The Griot

My grandfather, a wizen old grey-haired man,
was an orator and a storyteller.
He was a praise-singer, a historian,
and a personal biographer.
He practiced the ancient West African art of
narrating the traditions, customs, and histories
of a family or a village.
He was a griot.
He would sit in front of an audience at a wedding
and use every artistic weapon at his disposal,
to impress on them how great the groom and his family are.

He would use the slow and smooth grooves of jazz and blues,
the rapid-fire intonation and delivery of rap and hip hop,
or even the dramatic pauses, tones and gestures of spoken words.

He would use metaphors, similes, alliterations, onomatopoeia,
parables, and proverbs to describe the groom's proud heritage, his spirit, his bravery,
and his generosity.

My grandfather would tell the wedding guests about the groom's ancestors.
His great, great grandfather, the first person to settle in the village.
Always exaggerating,
he would tell how this great man
climbed un-climbable mountains.
How he swam alligator infested rivers, and brave wild animals in the jungle.
How he fought demons and spirits, but never lost hope.

He would speak about the groom's grandfather,
the greatest hunter the village had ever seen.
Always exaggerating,
he would tell the story of how this great man stalked a lion for days
then pounced and killed it with his bare hands.

Or the story of the groom's uncle,
the greatest wrestler of his tribe.
A man known as "the cat" because his back never touched the ground.
A man who never lost a match in his life.
My grandfather would tell how men would travel miles from surrounding villages
to challenge him, and how he always pinned them down.
Always exaggerating,
he would tell how this great wrestler, while he was over a hundred years old,

wrestled a young man to the ground.

My grandfather would tell the guests about wise kings, and brave warriors.
About beautiful princesses, and rich empires.
He would cry and scream, laugh, and jump around.
He would tell about white missionaries with their strange God,
and white colonialists with their strange laws.

He will talk about the arrival of the white men
and have grown men weeping like children
when he talked about how brothers used to fight against brothers,
and how the religious, social and traditional fabric that bound the tribes together
were broken.
He would remind them about when
men were forced to neglect their gods,
send their children to the white man's school,
and obligated to pay taxes for their lands because all of a sudden,
the white men owned all the lands now.
"And we all know," my grandfather would say sadly with a shake of his head,
"A man without a land is not really a man at all."

Then, he would talk about the groom's father,
the man who rallied the seven villages together
to fight the white colonialists and the white missionaries.
The man who fought, bled, and died to save the villages.
The groom would puff up his chest proudly.

happy to know that he is a descendant of a brave family.
The crowd would applaud the groom and his lucky wife,
and they would celebrate the ceremony late into the night.

My grandfather would go limp at the end of his presentation
and the crowd would give him a standing ovation.
They would carry him on their shoulders and throw money at his feet.
He would smile knowingly as he realized he had performed his sacred duty
of instilling respect, hope, and dignity to the groom, his family, and his tribe.

Blood Diamonds

As a student in high school and college, I frequently debate issues in person, online, and in classrooms. When participating in contentious debates about race, immigration, and minorities, it is not unusual that an opponent, usually when confounded with facts and evidences, would mutter the most dreaded sentence, "If you hate America so much, why don't you just go back from where you came from?" As I stated earlier, I am originally from Sierra Leone and sometimes, I wish I could just go "back to where I came from," but history has not been kind to my native land. After the country's independence in 1961, Sierra Leone has declined steadily. When compared to the rest of the world, we have been ranked almost at the bottom in education, economy, infrastructure, poverty, and healthcare. A country that that was once proclaimed as the jewel of West Africa with unlimited natural resources, precious stones and diamonds, has succumbed into a long era of repressive rule, corruption, military coups, civil war, and plague. Guerilla forces,

rebels, and tribalistic political leaders, and entrenched corrupt representatives all vied to misappropriate the vast diamond resources. As anyone who watched the 2006 Leonardo DiCaprio and Djimon Hounsou's movie *Blood Diamond* can attest, the decade long civil war that left 50.000 people dead and one million people displaced was catastrophic. An estimated 10,000 children, called child soldiers, were also affected by the war. The world witnessed the amputation of people, including children, so that they wouldn't help mine the "blood diamonds," as they were referred to.

After the end of the war, aided by the international peacekeeping force, there have been efforts to rebuild the country and the institutions. These efforts were thwarted by the outbreak of the Ebola virus disease that affected Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone from May 2014 to November 2015. The virus killed 5,147 people in these three countries, and left Sierra Leone already shaky infrastructure, economic and health facilities, in shambles. As much as the international communities have been helping, financial aids are appropriated to the coffers of political heads instead of helping the people. There is a small group of powerful political and business people in Sierra Leone that have most of the wealth. Although the country is consistently ranked the worst in most categories, these people live opulent lives, travel, live in mansions, and drive expensive cars.

The short story at the end of this perspective is based on one of these people. While the majority of Sierra Leoneans are starving and cannot afford the basic amenities necessary to survive, a few of them live lavishly from ill-gotten gains. The protagonist of the story is one of the political leaders of the country who fought for, and eventually gained independence from Britain. He was very vocal about the misuse of the mineral resources, power, and culture by the colonial power. He advocated and won the country's

independence on his terms, and became the country's first leader. Although the story is fictional, it is based on real politicians who promised nationalism, accountability, and an end to corruption, but became more corrupted and power-hungry than any colonial power. In the end, they became destitute, and died in oblivion.

The impact of people like the old man in the story is that they depleted the resources of these countries and destroyed the cultures, dreams, and beliefs of its people so much that citizens are fleeing in droves. Consequently, those in the diaspora, like myself, have no incentive to return, and help rebuild the country. My ultimate goal is to return to Sierra Leone and teach at the main university, but with the state of the country today, my goal has to be postponed. Sierra Leone, at the moment, is a work in progress; basic amenities, such as, electricity, good roads, and healthcare are in bad shape. Profits from the lucrative diamond trade, foreign aids, and taxes collected are used to line the pocket of heads of state and politicians, instead of the people. Built in 1827, Fourah Bay College, located in Freetown, is the country's main university. It was the first Western style and the oldest public university in West Africa. Students from other African countries flocked there to study theology and education. The success, and prestige of Fourah Bay College earned Freetown the moniker "the Athens of Africa." Today, it is dilapidated; without adequate desks, chairs, textbooks, and lab equipment. Therefore, teachers, especially those that are living out of the country, are unwilling to return and teach there. So, whenever I am told in the United States to go back to where I came from, I wish I could, but right now I don't have a choice but to continue living here as an unwanted and unappreciated immigrant.

The Old Man

My name is Ozymandias. King of Kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!

Nothing beside remains."

"Ozymandias" Percy Bysshe Shelley

As I slowly dragged myself up the top of the hill, I could clearly see the houses down below, so I stopped for a moment and gazed at the cluster of rusted corrugated rooftops arranged in no rational order. On my younger days, this was my favorite spot. I used to love to sit atop that hill with my tiny legs dangling off the edges while I dreamt of the wondrous and glamorous life I was going to live when I become an adult. With childlike fascination, I would watch the throng of people, tiny, like ants, jostling around trying to get to and from work. Like a movie I would watch old rusted vehicles, bicycles, and people dangerously navigating the narrow, crooked and dusty roads. I sluggishly trod on,

panting, sweating, out of breath, tired, dirty and irritated. As a young boy, I could easily run up and down that hill barely breaking a sweat. Now, halfway through, my heart was pounding and I needed to stop a few times as I labored to breath. I was ten years old then and not a thirty-four-year old slightly overweight man who had spent twenty years in America eating a diet consisting primarily of hamburgers and French fries. The lack of exercise did not help either. I trudged on, my sandals and feet covered with red dust that can only be found in that little corner of Africa. The sound of the bottom of my sandals crunching pebbles, the creaking of my aching joints, and my wheezing breath were the only things spurring me on. As much as I tried to hide it, I was scared and I had no intention of undertaking this pilgrimage. But somebody had to, because somewhere down there in one of those dirty, dilapidated houses, the old man was dying, and for reasons unknown to me, I was chosen to be both a witness and an interpreter.

The trek was getting easier because the road, if you can call it that, was now going downhill. I spotted the old man's house at the end of the corner and stopped once again to wipe my brow and face with my handkerchief which was now soaked with sweat and red dust. I walked on, passing women with children strapped on their backs, men with superhuman strength carrying loads on their heads that no mortal man should be able to carry, and children playing football with balls that were made of rags and plastic bags tightly wrapped with rubber bands and ropes. As I got closer to the old man's house, I noticed that pedestrians slowed down and cross to the other side of the road as they passed it; they could sense the feeling of dread emanating from the house as the old man was dying and everyone knew it.

I cautiously approached the house with my heart pounding and sweating profusely through my shirt. By the look of the outside, there were no indications that the occupant of the house was once the richest and most powerful man in the entire continent of Africa. Where were the cars, the jewelries, the helicopters, and the beautiful women? There were no muscular armed guards or press corps, no television cameras, or spectators--just a fence with a broken gate held together by dirty ropes and used bent rusted nails. The inside of the compound was no better than the outside; it was small with three huts facing an open clearing. The ground had been swept clean and watered to keep the red dust from rising, and the air smelt of death. The last hut on the right side of the compound had a door that was splattered with sheep's blood, adorned with a large animal skull, and a smoking pot--all meant to repel evil spirits. The goal was to scare off death at all cost, I knew then that was where the old man was. The door squeaked eerily as I pushed it open and entered. Inside, it was dark with only few strands of light coming through the holes in the bamboo palms that were used to cover the solitary narrow window. I silently crept forward towards the farthest side of the room, away from the bed where the old man laid, motionlessly.

I covered my nose and mouth with my handkerchief as the smell of the room was overpowering. The pungent odor of incense and cheap perfume mingled with the stench of piss, sweat, and *kaka* filled the room. Most of all, the air reeks of fear, rotten flesh and death. From my vantage point, I could see the old man prostrated helplessly and rigidly on a narrow bed that was covered with animal skins. By the bed was a small stool that was topped with a boiling pot that emanated foul vapors, and on the floor surrounding the bed were Arabic inscriptions, Bible verses, and a large chicken claw wrapped with a

bloody cloth, all strewn around in a distinctive pattern--the old man was covering his bases; he was searching for salvation either through Jehovah, Allah or *Olorun*. Gone was the abdominous imposing figure that exuded wealth and power; instead, the old man was small, brittle, wasted, and wizen. His thick mane of black hair was gone, his head was clean-shaven with a protruding skull that threatened to bust out of his skin. The sharp and commanding eyes that used to strike fear in men and adoration in women were now bloodshot and sunken.

At the height of his power, the old man made and broke men based on his whims. He took the wives, properties, wealth, and dignity from others because he could. He sentenced men who opposed him or disobeyed his command to death and imprisonment. The old man was the judge and the jury of the land. He was an egomaniac who peppered the country with giant portraits of himself with the inscription "My Will Be Done." He was, according to his autobiography, "An African god made from the same mantle as Zeus and Jupiter." As I gazed at the shrunken and disheveled man who helplessly wallowed in his own filth, I thought about a story he loved to tell at official state galas and political rallies. As he told it, at his official coronation, where he bestowed upon himself the title of "President for Life," he refused an audience with Queen Elizabeth's emissary. Instead he sent a message back to the Queen of England that reads, "This is a new era in Africa; no longer are we subjugated to our White oppressors. We have our own kings and queens and we are masters of our destiny." The old man became a national and an international hero. Absolute power indeed corrupts absolutely; he became a brutal and vicious dictator who looted and enslaved his people worse than the colonial masters. Now there he was, dying, alone, and insignificant.

I came out of my reverie and noticed that the old man's red beady eyes were fixed on me. Although he couldn't see me, because I was shrouded by the darkness, he knew I was there. He tried to speak but his throat was patched and a croaking guttural animal sound emitted from his throat. I attempted to come out of the shadows to offer him a drink of water but was stopped by the sounds of activities coming from the compound. An old woman came into the hut, glanced suspiciously in my direction, propped up the old man, and tried to get him to drink from a cup that was on the stool. She closely examined him mumbling something about it only be a matter of time now under her breath, shook her head, and went back outside. There were more voices coming from the compound. It seemed that people were gathering outside to witness the demise of the old man.

All the noises and commotion coming from the compound were of no interest to the old man; he had eyes and ears only for me. He kept squinting searchingly towards the shadow where I sat quietly and discreetly. Hard as he tried, he couldn't move, speak, command, or scream. His time had come, he couldn't escape this moment and he knew it. His eyes grew wider and the heaving of his chest got more sporadic as he struggled to breath. On cue, the crowd from the compound started entering the hut. The young women were screaming and bawling while the children beat on pots and pans in a futile attempt to scare death away. Meanwhile, the light seemed to be going off in the old man's eyes and his limbs started thrashing. His body suddenly went limp, he arched his back, took his last breath, and with what sounded like the whimpering of a small trapped rodent, the old man died.

No one noticed as I quietly slipped out of the hut and the compound. Outside, it had started to rain, not the cold harsh rain of the *harmattan* season, but a drizzle that cooled

down the oppressive heat and dampen the dust on the road. The children were outside again playing in the muddy pool of rainwater that settled in the potholes on the road. I was getting wet walking in the rain without an umbrella, but I didn't mind. Somehow, I felt that I needed to be cleansed from what I had just witnessed. For the first time that day, I smiled, there was lightness in my step and a glow in my heart. I had a feeling that this was the start of a great day and the beginning of something good that will endure. I recalled a song we used to sing as children. It was about the greatness of Africa and the resilience of her people. I had not thought about that song in years, but somehow, I vividly remembered the words. I took off my sandals and jumped in the muddy puddle with the children and started singing:

Oh how lucky we are
to be born in such a great land
with brave men and beautiful women.
Oh how lucky we are
to be Africans.

Intersectionality

As an immigrant, I am painfully aware that my host country does not cater for my needs. America was not created for someone like me; the language, society, infrastructure, and technology were not invented for a black immigrant Muslim man. I am okay with that. I am used to contorting my mind, body, and image to fit the American narrative. The act of assimilation is a circus act whereby I attempt to become someone I am not. Although the constant double-guessing, negative-stereotyping, and astonishing exclamations when I perform a basic act can be frustrating, I realize and acknowledge that it is the price I have to pay to live in this country. The shock of people finding out that I speak "good" English, the initial rejection by people who assume they cannot understand me because I speak with an accent, and the constant need for me to defend Islamic terrorists, have become my daily responsibilities.

My feeling of dread and discomfort are not always results of a hostile American environment; sometimes it is surprisingly an outcome of been treated differently in a good way. When I am with a group who tiptoes around me, and attempts to make me feel comfortable by acting, speaking, and behaving differently so they wouldn't hurt my feelings, I feel more isolated. Although they mean well, they do not understand that the way to make me feel welcome and comfortable is for them to act naturally. I get invited to American family gatherings often but I usually refuse. In weddings and Thanksgiving dinners, I am, for the most part, the only Black person in the group and the only one who speaks with an accent. When I get to attend these events, I can usually be found at the back of the room, or at the end of the table quietly trying to avoid eye contact. My worst nightmare is for some guest to call attention to me by attempting to include me in the discussion.

In my academic and professional journey in the United States, I have encountered several instances of racism and xenophobia that compounded my feelings of frustration and isolation. I worked at the Hyatt Hotel in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for a few years and my experiences there were as disturbing as they were illuminating. I started as a bellman, and rose to be a guest service supervisor. In case you don't know what a bellman is, we are the people who stand in front of the hotel wearing bright uniforms with military type insignias. My job was to help guests with their luggages and arrivals and departures. We provided valet and also concierge services, and got tips in return because we were paid only minimum wage, which was $5.15. As hard as I worked every day, I could not make as much tips as the other white bellmen. Even when we perform the same tasks, I get tipped lesser that the others. I remember been frequently accosted by guests, who

requested help from another bellman because they claimed they couldn't understand my accent.

Eventually, I got fired from that job when a white bellman reported to human resources that he felt physically intimidated by me even though he was about a foot taller and about thirty pounds heavier than I was. Apparently, the idea of the big, bad, scary black man is a thing in America. My proximity to some white people or their children scares them. The consequence of that experience is that I became conscious of myself when dealing with other people professionally, socially, and academically. I frequently practice my arm placements, and my facial expression in front of a mirror before I venture out. At meetings I plan ahead and remind myself to smile, and speak slowly so as not to give the wrong impression of an angry black man. I made it a habit of standing as far back in an elevator, away from people as I can. I always stand two steps back in the escalator, and when I am in line at the store, I give enough space so as not to scare the person in front of me. If I notice a white woman approaching at a sidewalk, I immediately cross the street, and when pulled over by the police, I made sure my hands are clearly visible. Being Black in America is a full time job; it is time-consuming and exhausting.

In one of my academic classes, another student would not participate in a discussion until I do. He will then start his point with, "What Rashid is trying to say is …" then go on to misrepresent my point. Eventually I had to point it out to him and asked him to speak for himself, and not try to explain my point. There is a misconception about a connection between speaking with an accent and the level of someone's intelligence. I spent a lot of time in some of my classes refuting Eurocentric based "facts" and philosophy. Philosophies, ethics, and morals of America and the Western world are

discussed as Gospel truth while those of the rest of the world were never discussed or considered.

Through the years, I made it a rule to avoid discussing religion and politics at work and with people I don't know. The threat of Islamic terrorism and the effects it has on American society is a topic I get asked about a lot. Even when presented with facts, the narratives of the Islam as a religion of violence is embroidered in the fabric of some American sectors, especially in talk radio, conservative blogs, and Fox news. I spent countless hours defending Islam and pointing out the hypocrisy in the discussion of crimes committed by Arab terrorists, and those committed by white Americans. I made it my priority to live my life as an example of what a black, Immigrant, and Muslim man ought to be; I carried myself with respect and dignity, I don't drink alcohol or take any illegal drugs, and I have no criminal record. Everyday I wake up I realize that I am representing millions of people to an American audience who do not know them, their cultural practices, or their beliefs. This burden of been a representation of an entire people and religion can be tiring. All these struggles result in a cathartic release every time I get to go back home. I found out that the minute I get off the plane, I feel like a heavy load had been lifted off my shoulder. I become me again; I smile more, I am happier, I feel comfortable, and I get a feeling of belonging to a place or an entity. The adage is true, there is no place like home.

Afternoon Reverie

1

Walking barefoot and shirtless
through cobblestone paved roads,
sated in good humor and contentment,
a doorbell chimes scaring the birds
that perched on the rainbow tree.
Awaken to sand between my toes
lazy warm breeze blowing through white linen robe.
Away, away foul thoughts, I whisper
This dream is mine find yours.

11

Sweet aroma of exotic cuisines,

whiffs from great mountains and dusty roads,

hypnotizing sounds of rain beating on corrugated rooftops,

and the sound of children and dogs splashing in muddy rivers.

I doze off in my lazy chimera

content with the world,

knowing the Garden of Eden is just around the corner.

111

The melodic sounds of the call to pray

blazing forth five times a day from atop the Mosque's mezzanine

Allahu Akbar, hayya ala-salah, hayya ala- falah. La ilala illa-llah;

A reminder to go praise Allah

for prayer is better than sleep.

Yet I sleep away

because elusive sleep is a mirage.

1V

A bevy of lithe queens

brave warriors and beautiful princesses.

Pulsating drums akin to jungle music

colorful carnival beads and feathers.

White-toothed smiles and friendly demeanor.

Sweat-glittering youth dancing the night away.

Could not move me from my bubble of bliss

V

Agile dancers and oiled-muscled wrestlers.

Beautiful women beckoning me forth to participate.

The warmth of open fire on cold *harmarttan* nights,

and fishermen chanting as they haul in their day's catch,

none could rouse me up from my afternoon reverie.

For I am home
and at home,
my mind is at rest.

Hybridity/Otherness

As a student of literature and philosophy; I have a Bachelor in English and a minor in philosophy, I have learned that when I am considered as "Other," it causes me to reassess my life and reflect on my identity. I am constantly asking questions of myself that illustrate my thinking of self. These questions also enable me attempt to figure out other people's perception of me. Most of the time, I find myself in a space between being an American and an African. As much as I am not embraced as a "real" American because of my skin color, religion, and my accent, I found out I am sometimes viewed as an interloper when I go back home. I traverse this threshold gingerly, with trepidation and caution. I have lived in America so long that I am accustomed to some of her cultures and practices. My American cultural experiences sometimes made me uncomfortable when I am required to perform my African rituals some of which I took pleasure in when I was a child.

In America, I constantly attempt to assert myself and affirm to people that I exist. It feels sometimes that the conversations and activities in public places were not inclusive enough to include me. These occasions sometimes arise in my professional, academic, and social lives. I work for a company that helps people with developmental disabilities and every year around Christmas time, they put on a Christmas play. Last year they titled the play "Christmas Around The World." The play details how people in different countries celebrate Christmas. Although the company had about a dozen employees from the African continent, they decided to include China, Japan, Greenland, and Germany in the production and excluded African countries. There were no employees from these countries that work at the company yet they were included. When I brought this fact up to the manager who is responsible for the production, she innocently exclaimed that she didn't mean to offend, but she didn't know if people in Africa celebrated Christmas. I patiently informed her that there are over one billion people in the continent of Africa, and according to the World Bank, about half of them, (500 million) identify themselves as Christians; that is more than the number of Christians living in the United States. Instances like that result in me questioning my inclusion as a member of the society.

In another instance, a coworker went to see the new *Avenger* movie over the weekend, and when I informed him that I would have like to go see the movie with him, he was surprised because according to him, he never knew black people liked superhero movies. Based on my immigrant experience, I found out that some American have no concept of things, cultures, and people that are beyond their basic American experience. They conceive Christianity, patriotism, freedom, and democracy as uniquely American; that these concepts were invented and practiced only in the United States. A friend jokingly

told me one time that some Americans think they invented Christianity and that Jesus was born in Texas. There is a prevalent feeling that America is the only country in the world that has freedom, and that democracy and patriotism are innately American. I am always doing a balancing act of trying to decimate these sentiments, and at the same time being careful not to offend people. Attempting to assimilate, but not participate in ignorant caricatures and stereotypes are my daily struggle here in America.

In Africa, I have to slowly ingratiate myself into the culture. As most African cultures are communal, I had to discard the Western concept of *owning* and *personal space*. I had to get use to living in a house with extended family members who came and went as they please and would use things in my house without asking permission. On Fridays, after *Jummma* (the afternoon prayer), the entire family, including maids, strangers, and neighbors, would sit on the floor and eat with our hands from a big bowl. This act of participating in meals is done to signify an egalitarian society.

Transportation is a scary experience back home. The roads are small and the drivers refuse to obey basic driving rules and street signs. After a few missed car accidents, I decided to hire a driver, or better yet, take public transportation. Although I can afford to take a comfortable and spacious taxi, I love to take the small colorful minivans that can be found in every urban city in the African continent. These vans, called *poda podas*, are painted with bright colors and adorned with Biblical, Islamic, or popular sayings. They have personalized musical horns that the drivers blow indiscriminately thereby adding to the panic, commotion, and pandemonium that is the African streets. Sitting capacities in these vans are not followed; most vans double their sitting capacity so passengers are dangerously pack in these death traps driven by drivers who sped through intersections

and traffic lights. A trip in one of these minivans is like going to a carnival--loud noises, music, colorful attires, and fights are the norm. I revel in these festivities and used them as basis for my experiences and topics for my writings. I have used characters and plot lines in poems and short stories that I encountered in these exciting trips. Local experiences, cultural rituals, and practices are heightened whenever I return home to visit. African wedding ceremonies, funerals, and celebrations have greater meanings to me after my immigrant experience. I found out that I seek and frequently welcome these occasions. I used these experiences to soak up my *Africaness,* which I use sparingly in the United States when I encounter incidents of racism and xenophobia.

Here

With profound sorrow and desperation
I proclaim my humanity, based on mutual existence.
I say, *I am here, look at me.*
I exist
I am me
I am you
I couldn't be anything else.
Like laser beams directed from the farthest galaxy
dodging planets and stars,
I was chosen.
Naked, and with my arms reaching for the skies
I offer myself to the universe,
only to be ignored, marginalized and betrayed.
"I am here!" I scream.
I like it here.

In here, I exist.
You see me.
You hear me here.
Here, I matter.
I will shine so bright that
the sun, like a jealous lover,
will peek out behind the clouds.
The planets will follow my gaze
and bow down in submission because
I am original MAN
And no matter what you say,
I matter,
and I am here.

Reflections

In an attempt to find myself
I searched through empty houses and vacant lots,
rummaging bare cupboards and kitchen drawers
Finding blood-soaked knives and silent skeletons.
In freedom and in chains
my love for self and appreciation of life
supersedes worry, pain, and strife.
Without malice and regret, I wander,
asking myself, is it true what our elders say?
A man is not really a man without a land to call his own.
We, as descendant of the Ham,

cannot in good conscience willing find

our land of milk and honey filled with seventy virgins.

Yet we continue to survive,

vilifying villains forever enslaved

whether in minds, spirit, or brains.

We ask our ancestral spirits

to lead us to our green pastures

while we gaze at the mirror

at our distorted reflections of self-hate.

What our forefathers believed of what we are

cannot be reconciled with what we've become.

We cannot decide what to keep or what to throw away,

we are unaware of the length of the journey

and what it takes to get there,

or how to thrive and sustain.

But indignant and with perseverance we attempt to maintain

a life not meant for us but

stubbornly we stayed.

Do not be sad, it will all be revealed, the good book said.

In the end,

what I've learned during my brief time on this earth

that I will take to my early grave,

is that life is a figment of some deity's imagination

that is carelessly written in invisible ink.

The Power of Words

"*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never break me.***"**
Children's rhyme

I have been called a *nigger* a few times since I have lived in the United States. The power of the word cannot be overemphasized. I am against the usage of the word, either from a white person, or a black person. I believe that words have histories--etymology is a chronological history of words and their origins; it is a detailed account of a word's journey, changes, forms, and meanings. The word *nigger* is a disparaging and offensive term that is usually hauled at a black person to cause offense. It has been used, since slavery, to depict adverse and stereotypical aspects of blacks. Even with its changes in forms, its meaning still elicits negative, and sometimes violent reactions and emotions. When a black person is called a *nigger* it hurts both psychologically and physically. I remember the first time someone called me a *nigger*; it is one of those moments that

black people never forget: It is a pivotal moment in a black person's life that changes our perspective on how we live and how we ultimately reflect ourselves in the American society.

The first time I got called a *nigger* I was fifteen years old and I was with friends at the Mall of America in Minnesota. For a teenager, going to the mall is one of the only fun things to do in Minnesota, especially in the winter. Minnesota is one of the coldest states in the country, so we would go to the mall any chance we get. When we get there, we would go see a movie, eat at the food court, and just be teenagers and run around. On that fateful day, I was chasing my friends around and I accidentally bumped into an older white man. He turned around, glared at me, and muttered "fucking *nigger*" right in my face. I was stunned. The entire episode felt like a special effect slow motion scene in a movie. I could clearly see his face, his knotted brow, his sneer with speck of spit on the side of his mouth, and the hatred in his eyes. He was mad and he verbally attacked me with the most despicable word he could muster up. I immediately felt deflated, and I wanted to go home. I was conflicted; I felt numb but yet I was enraged, my heart was racing, but yet I was paralyzed, I was shocked and at the same time, not really surprised as I was aware of the history of racism in America. I just wanted to leave the mall, go home, and lock myself in my room. I don't remember the bus ride home, but I remember lying on my bed, crying under my blanket until I fell asleep.

If I had to interpret that experience, I would say the man tried to dehumanize me. Without knowing me, he decided that he was better than me, and that I was not human enough to be treated with dignity. My self worth was questioned and I had to reevaluate who I was and what I believed in. I have heard people accuse victims of verbal racism by

asserting that it is just words, but based on my experience, it goes beyond that. There is a physical and psychological punch that is delivered when one is called a *nigger*. Like I stated earlier, words have histories and footprints. When I got called a *nigger*, I felt like I was reliving all the sufferings that black people went through: from the middle passages, to slavery, through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and police brutality. These feelings stayed with me for a long period of time. Eventually, I started putting them into perspective, and the conclusion I came up with was, no matter who you are, what you have accomplished, how moral and ethical you are, or even how rich you are, if you are black, somebody will always see you as a *nigger*. There is a song on the rapper Jay Z's new album titled "The Story of OJ" and in the refrain of the song he raps,

Light nigga, dark nigga,
faux nigga, real nigga
Rich nigga, poor nigga,
house nigga, field nigga,
Still nigga, still nigga

The context of the song is that when he was at his professional and cultural heights, the football player O.J. Simpson, because he never stood up or spoke up about the plight of black men at that time, was asked if he considered himself a black man. He replied, "I'm not black, I'm O.J;" insinuating that he is post-racial depiction. The implication is that, no matter what kind of black man you are; light-skinned, dark-skinned, real, fake, affluent, or destitute, if you are black, people will always treat you as they would treat the worst kind of black man; the *nigger*. There is a joke that goes, "What do you call a black man with a PhD?" The punch line is "Doctor *nigger*." As I stated earlier, in my social life, I am against using the word; I neither call others or myself the word, nor do I allow others to use it when referring to me. I am using it in these instances to highlight a point. I do

not advocate banning it as I believe in free speech, but the insistence of some white people that it is unfair for blacks to use it while they couldn't utter the word confounds me. Why would someone insist on saying a word that most people in a distinctive group deem offensive and hurtful? We call our friends and love ones names that only us are allowed to. There are basic rules and rights that people understand and practice, but only when it suits them. People understand these practices yet act ignorant and oblivious when applied to blacks and minorities.

Voice of Africa (Spoken Words)

There is a misconception
about a connection
between speaking with an accent and
either one’s ability to speak English or their level of intelligence.
When you speak with an accent like I do,
your intellectual abilities and capabilities are always questioned.

I realize that we live in a society of images.
A society where popular culture dictate
what we should wear,
what we should look like,
what we should weigh,

and even what we should sound like.
But no matter how much I
A-R-T-I-C-U-L-A-T-E or E-N-N-U-N-C-I-A-T-E
I cannot sound American.
And why would I want to?

There is a reason why I sound the way I do,
I was breastfed on indigenous African languages.
Dialects like Mende, Susu, Fulani, Yoruba, Hausa, and Swahili
flow through my veins.
My tongue had been basted and marinated with
the blood, sweat, and tears of African warriors and tribesmen
who fought colonialists and missionaries, lions and elephants
with awesome bravery, armed only with a machete.

I am the voice of Africa.
I am the voice of the nameless, the faceless, and the voiceless Africans
from Mogadishu to Kampala,
from Freetown to Johannesburg,
from Abuja to Accra.
If you listen carefully
you can hear their pain and suffering echoing in my voice.

I speak for a continent that had been left for dead.
A people that had been demoted and downgraded to a third human status.

I am the voice of a people that had been so ignored
that even when millions of Africans
from East to West,
from North to South,
screamed together in symphonic agony,
the West still closed their eyes and their ears,
turned off the lights,
hid under the bed,
and wished them away like the bogeyman.

But we are not going anywhere.
We were here when Adam gave a rib.
We provided the ram so Abraham wouldn't sacrifice his son.
We were the diversion so the Israelites could cross the Red Sea.
Who did you think watched over the children
while Jesus was up on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights?

I am proud of my accent.
I walk around with it with pride like battle scars.
I show it off like gang signs.
And even though sometimes
I am forced to wear the mask
and expected to be silent an invisible
among a crowd of people.
I am here,

right here,

standing in front of you

speaking your language.

Can you speak mine?

Of Strangers

"And when he entered into the city all the
people came to meet him, and they were
crying out to him as with one voice.
And the elders of the city stood forth and said:
Go not yet away from us.
A noontide have you been in our twilight
and your youth has given us dreams to dream.
No stranger are you among us, nor a
guest, but our son and our dearly beloved.
Suffer not yet our eyes to hunger for your face."

"The Prophet" - Kahlil Gibran

I do not intend to give the impression that the totality of my life here in the United States had been one of isolation, pain, and angst; I have had positive experiences also. I have met incredible people who accepted me with open arms and compassion. I have witnessed amazing feats of endurance, grace, and heroism. The "can do" attitude of the

average American is a sight to behold; they believe that they can achieve anything with hard work and innovation. People take the American creed, "in America you can be anything you want" literally. I have seen people come together and persevere when faced with extraordinary circumstances. Americans take the phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," that is the United States' Declaration of Independence literally; they intend and expect to be happy, no matter their fortunes in life. In quiet moments, I have spoken to, cried, and debated empathetic Americans on the topics of geopolitics, religion, sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and immigration. I find most Americans sympathetic and welcoming.

I had teachers who believed in me and encouraged me to speak up even when I was self-conscious about my accent. At my first job, as a cleaner at an apartment complex, my boss, without me asking, recommended that I be put on a managerial track because she believed that I had potential. While working at a hotel in Minnesota, my manager promoted me from a room cleaner to a bell man, and then to a front desk supervisor because he told me that he thought I was smart enough to be in management. At my university, the entire English department has been encouraging. In my classes, my input and my perspectives have been given the considerations and critique it deserved. Although I found most American open-minded and kind, the problem is that racism and bigotry is embedded in the American system. Some white Americans are so used to how the system works that they are resistant to the plight of minorities even when faced with facts and evidences. When presented with a problem, America knows what to do, but when these problems affect minorities, the people in power choose to blame the victims rather than offer help.

A case in point is the opioid crisis that is ravaging white suburban neighborhoods recently. During the late 80s an earlier 90s, there was a similar crisis facing blacks in urban areas all over the country. The Crack Epidemic, as it was known, destroyed families and neighborhoods. The government response was more policing, stricter laws, and more jails. "The War on Drugs" was devastating to black families as entire generation of black children grew up with single mothers because their fathers were in prisons. Now that there is an opioid epidemic affecting white families, the government is implementing and emphasizing decriminalization of drugs, free drug rehabilitation facilities, and funding resources that aid former drug addicts. I find most Americans apathetic when it comes to holding their representatives responsible, therefore, their values, morals, and beliefs are not reflected or followed by their representatives. National polls on gun control, immigration, and abortion, show that the laws do not represent the will of the people. As much as Americans believe in immigration, the laws say otherwise, and the anti-immigration believers are more vocal and more proactive.

Americans seem to have a proclivity to resistance, especially when it comes to black people and minorities. When blacks complain about the police killing of unarmed black men, there was a more than usual increase of support for the police. "Blue Lives Matter" was introduced to counter the "Black Lives Matter" movement. When black athletes knelt during the National Anthem to protest police brutality and the unequal justice system, they were accused of "disrespecting the flag." Finally, when blacks opposed the Confederate flag, there was an increase in the number of people flying the flag on their houses and their vehicles. I live in Dallastown, Pennsylvania where people love to display the Confederate Flag on their vehicles and houses. My next-door neighbor

proudly exhibits the flag on his pick-up truck that he parks next to my car. So, every morning on my way to my car, I am forced to confront a flag, based on history and primary documents that were founded with the sole purpose of maintaining slavery.

As an immigrant, I am considered a stranger in America. Based on my beliefs and practices as a Muslim and an African, my concept of how a stranger ought to be treated is different from what I have experienced. I am a practicing Muslim and I believe that Islam is a holistic religion; everything a Muslim does is geared towards the worship of Allah. Therefore, the welcoming and treatment of strangers have religious significance and implications. We are taught in Islam that helping strangers is equivalent to helping Allah; a good deed done to a stranger is tantamount to a sacrifice to Allah. In the *hadith*, which is the source of tradition and daily practices of the prophet Muhammad, we learned about the *Hegira;* the prophet Muhammad's flight to Medina. To avoid assassination, the prophet migrated from *Mecca* to *Medina* in the year 622. On his flight, we are taught during Koranic studies, that he only survived through the help and charity of strangers he encountered during his journey. The story is told to emphasize the importance of charity, which is one of the five pillars of Islam.

Culturally, in Mandingo folklore, spirits take the forms of strangers who appeared at people's doors asking for help. One's good fortunes and health are tied to their benevolence towards strangers. There is a cautionary tale told on cold African nights, around campfires, by mothers and old men, about a family who turned away their ancestral spirit who was disguised as a stranger. Their punishment was disease and death of their first-born. The moral of the story is for listeners to make sure they welcome and help strangers who might be spirits testing their altruism. In some houses, prepared foods

are left on doorways overnight for weary travelers. When one encounter a person who is in distress we say a common phrase that translates to “there for the grace of God goes I.” Selflessness, benevolence, and generosity are stressed among my people and we are judged by the way we treat strangers.

I believe that America has a moral imperative to extend help and empathy to people in need. Refugees, immigrants, and minorities ought to be treated with dignity by white Americans and the government. Portraying immigrants and minorities as bad people or criminals, enable their subjugation and pain. Most immigrants, like myself, are hard working individuals who are forced to leave the safety of their homes to make better lives for themselves and their families. The physical transportation of a person is what is stressed when we talk about immigrants, but it is the spiritual, emotional, and psychological transportation of self that is the most impactful. We not only have to deal with the rigors of work, health, and safety of our family, like the rest of the population, we also have to worry about racism and xenophobia.

Inferno

"The devil is not as black as he is painted."

Dante Alighieri

1

Yes we are our brother's keeper

and there is a special place in hell.

For ignoring grieving mothers mourning black bodies of teenage sons,

for justifying hate and brutality heaped on others,

and tattooed skin that judges ebony hues.

11

Yes we are our brother's keeper

and there is a special place in hell.

For "Southern Pride" that evoke screaming images of slaves, rape, torture, and murder.

For refugee children not loved and accepted as our own,

and for bemoaning political correctness in the face of hate.

111

Yes we are our brother's keeper

and there is a special place in hell.

For screaming "all lives matter" and "blue lives matter"

in an effort to drown out the consciousness of the lack of value of black lives.

For laws that humiliate and marginalize,

and free speeches that castigates and dehumanize.

1V

Yes we are our brother's keeper

and there is a special place in hell.

A place,

away from the unbelievers,

the sexual deviants,

the indulgent gluttons,

the greedy,

the angry,

the blasphemers,

and the violent.

Within the ninth circle of hell

frozen in a lake of ice,

reside the souls of those who betray the humanity of others

and yes we are our brother's keeper

and there is a special place in hell.

In The End

"*To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time."* James Baldwin

One of the issues I struggled with while writing this piece is how to tell my story. If hours of literature and poetry classes have taught me anything, it is that the lens through which I deliver my story is as important as the story itself. I have always been interested in how the word "interpreters" is used in literary texts. In Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *In the House of the Interpreter,* the word is used as a conduit through which a story is told. In literary texts there is a tendency for an author, usually through a narrator, to interpret the actions, speech, and motives of characters. A narrator is present in literary works; it is the vantage point from which a writer or poet tell their story. Either as a reliable, unreliable, omniscient, or a first-person, a narrator is tasks with the sole purpose of relating the story to the audience.

In Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," the three surviving men in the boat (the only named character, the oiler Billy, did not survive the ordeal) consider themselves as interpreters. They feel they are trusted with the responsibility of telling the story of their survival. They are given the task of reflecting on what happened, and come to a conclusion, based on their faith, outlook, and life philosophy. More than anything else, they feel that they can interpret nature and human suffering. Therefore, the story is told by the correspondent based on his life experience as is seen through his recollections of events before he boarded the boat.

Kenyan author, professor, poet, and playwright, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, in *In the House of the Interpreter,* presents an interesting take on the concept of interpreting. Stuck in a prestigious English boarding school that is manned by colonial teachers whose goal is to mold young students to "civic-minded blacks who would work within the parameters of the existing racial state," Ngugi is constantly aware that just outside the gates of his school, the atrocities of British colonial rule and the violent uprising of the Mau Mau rebellion are happening. The author challenges the colonial narrative of interpreting the realities of the people's suffering under the burden of colonialism. The sanctuary of an elitist educational establishment, does not lessen the realities of the author's experience in the real world, as is seen when he goes to visit his family on school break. The young Ngugi's role then is to interpret the motives and practices of his white schoolmasters and reconcile it with the struggles and realities of the Kenyan people.

These two examples of different narrators are what I struggled with when I was thinking about how to tell my story. I try to portray my perspective as a narrator, albeit a bias one, as honestly as I can. My journey as an immigrant is written through the lens of

an outsider. As much as I tried to assimilate, the forces of the dominant culture refused to let me view the society as vividly and as unbiased as I would have liked. I made assumptions about the motives and meanings of some of the people and the circumstances I lived through not because I wanted to, but because I had to. I am thankful for the people I encountered throughout my journey. The ones that helped me, I am grateful to, the ones who attempted to deter me, I am also grateful to because they spurred me on. I remember asking a philosophy professor if his knowledge of the world and teachings and understanding of great philosophers made him a better person. In other words, does understanding the motives and the reasoning of great thinkers made his life happier. I don't remember his answer, but I would like to attempt to answer that question, based on my experiences, as a black Muslim immigrant.

Firstly, academically, what have I learned? I graduated in 2015 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in philosophy. I am writing this piece to fulfill a requirement for a Masters in English Education. This means that I have read and was taught modern and ancient philosophy, the latter I took with a class on Shakespeare at Oxford University in England. In English, I took courses in rhetoric and composition, literary criticism, literature, linguistics, and creative writing. I also took classes in Old English, ESL teaching, African American literature, and teaching and reading pedagogies. I have participated in workshops, presentations, and attended seminars in teaching and learning. Most of all, I have been fortunate to have amazing teachers who opened my mind to ways that I should view the world and its people. I was taught to avoid myopic thinking and to discard binary reasoning. Therefore, according to James Baldwin, I am "relatively conscious."

Socially, when he made the decision to send me to the United States to get an education, my father was unaware that I needed a Green Card, a Social Security Number, and a sponsor to be enrolled in school. The relatives I was supposed to stay with didn't have the resources to help with my schooling. I spent years moving around and living with friends, and relatives. I have lived in Alexandria/Fairfax, Virginia, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Tucson, Arizona, Columbus, Ohio, Silver Spring, Maryland, and Reading/York/Dallastown, Pennsylvania. I have been impoverished, homeless, and forced to survive without financial or emotional support for long periods of time. I have worked as a house cleaner, dishwasher, carpet installer, truck driver, and taxi driver. I have suffered the harshest winter in Minnesota, and heat wave in Arizona. In the lowest point of my life, I had questioned God, and lost my faith. I remember getting a call from Sierra Leone on a cold early morning winter in Minnesota: my sister had breast cancer and it had metastasized. I remember my mother crying, and my brothers trying to sound nonchalant, so as not to worry me. Two days later my sister died and I sat alone in a strange land, sad, worried about my family, helpless because I couldn't do anything, and questioning why I stayed in America all these years. I have had moments like those throughout the years, moments when I questioned my faith, my motives, and myself.

I work for a company that helps people with physical and mental disabilities. This is the most rewarding thing that I have done in my life. Every day, I get to help individuals who are afflicted with the entire spectrum of autism, and mental and physical disabilities navigate life and their communities. I help them get comfortable in their domestic lives, administer or help them take their medications, take them on outings, and help integrate them in their communities. I have taken individuals to movies, concerts, cruises, casinos,

and even took two individuals to Elvis' Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee. I can honestly say that, through my years working with these individuals, I gained more from them than they gained from me. I appreciate my life better after a day of helping individuals attempt the basic tasks of eating, getting dressed, brushing their teeth, and even getting into vehicles.

I got introduced to people with different personalities, interests, and capabilities. Going to work every day has being a thrill. As soon as I enter their workspaces or houses, they would scream my name or run over to give me hugs. For the most part, these individuals do not judge or treat me differently because of my skin color, religion, or nationality. The reason why I stayed at my job for all these years is that I feel more comfortable with individuals with mental disabilities than I do with the rest of the population. I worked with an individual with Down syndrome and mental retardation who called me "Louis" the first day we were introduced (apparently, he is a big fan of Louis Armstrong, and because we are both black, he associate Louis Armstrong with me). He has been calling me Louis now for eight years, in fact, because of that; most of the staff in the management office calls me Louis. Another individual is passionate about fishing and because I had to take him, I learned how to fish. He patiently taught me how to thread a line, attach a hook, and install bait. Although he is autistic, he introduced me to the art and joy of fishing. We spend countless hours in lakes and even went on weeklong fishing trips. I get my passion for fishing from our daily expedition to fishing holes all over Pennsylvania. We bonded through cold evenings and nights, ecstatic when we caught a fish and despondent when we don't. I dread the day when I have to resign from my job with these individuals. Eventually, I will have to start my teaching

profession but I realize that I will miss the sense of comfort and friendship that I have with these individuals, and hope I will be able to find that sense of belonging at my new job.

There are countless research analyses about if behaviors are innate or taught. The fact that these individuals with mental and psychological disabilities are not as racist to me as the rest of the population supports the notion that maybe racism is taught. Maybe at an early age, children notice or are introduced to the concept of treating people differently based on the color of their skins. What does it say about the American society when individuals with disabilities are more accommodating, and welcoming to immigrants and people of color than the rest of the population? On my spare time, I contemplate these questions and attempt to make sense of how a people who live in arguable the best country in the world and are privileged with access to wealth, healthcare, and security be so callous and unkind.

As James Baldwin aptly notes, I am in a rage almost all the time. I am "relatively conscious" as my education and life experiences have help me understand the nature of things. I perceptively pick up on biases and context when I am spoken to, and when my life, race, and religion are discussed. Like my philosophy professor, my study of literary criticisms and application of educational philosophies assist me to make connections and conclusions that maybe the average person does not make; this does not make me happier, or make my life easier. I was in a rage a few years ago when a Christian "pastor," to protest terrorism, set a *Quran* on fire. When politician and others complain that immigrants are taking away jobs from citizens, I get enraged. When people point to the lack of compliance of a black unarmed man who is shot by the police, I get enraged.

When people pretend ignorance and fly the Confederate flag with "pride," I get enraged. Dog whistle enrages me, and racism molded in the guise of nationalism, support for veteran, and Christianity, enrages me. I am relatively conscious and in a rage almost all the time.

Epilogue

As someone residing in a foreign land, one of the things I miss most is the landscape and flora and fauna of my native land. When I go visit, I find pleasure looking outside at the land, plants, animals, and mountains. I would gaze longingly at herd of cows walking across a field, or at birds flying in formation across the sky. The soil and sand textures are different from that in the United States so I would hold them between my fingers and let them slowly drip back to the ground. I travel on canoes and look at different plants growing from islands and around rivers. I go fishing and discovered different fish species that are not found in the Western world. I go exploring huge anthills and look in, using a flashlight, at the magnificent intricate architecture inside. I have witness fishermen pulling their fishing nets in after a long day and seen it filled with fish of all sizes and colors. I take pleasure in the ambience and natural environment of the African continent. The sounds of children laughing, singing, and playing outside until late at night make me happy. The noises and cacophony of the African market with its colors of fabrics and

fruits, and the calm afternoons sitting at the beach just gazing at the clouds are always happy moments I revel in.

The rain on raining seasons in Africa falls more rapidly and because the rooftops of most houses are made of corrugated sheets, the rain pounding on them makes rhythmic sounds that I use as cadence to go to sleep. I have slept entire afternoons on hammocks under a shade listening to the rain making music on the rooftops. The stars seem brighter and more brilliant in African skies. Usually, with no smoke or air pollution, on clear nights, you feel that you can touch the stars. Lovers used these nights to take strolls and huddle in dark places while mothers keep watchful eyes over their daughters. There is a peaceful serene atmosphere in Africa that the world doesn't know about. Africa is mostly depicted as a land of poverty, pain, famines, and wars. When you watch the news, all you can learn of Africa is the terrible condition and suffering of its people, but the continent has a soulful holistic side. The beauty, natural landscape, and the vibrant energy of its people are lost amongst the West's obsession on its negative sides and past. After years living as an immigrant in the United States, I am ready to go back and live my life as a proud African.

*Coelestis Musicae (Heavenly Music)

Noah's flock in harmonious aubades,
welcomes virtual dawn with pomp and fanfare.
Like moonlight's ghost, mist of wavering shadow wisps
dances to music from unseen reed.
Warm harmattan breeze accompanies
maestros of musica ficta.
Susurrant grass in step with coconut branches
jostling like strapping young Adonis
yearning to impress the village Muse.
Litany orchestras of lights in perfect unison,
shimmering waves of winking water flies,
frolicking birds with brilliant chroma,
all dancing to Africa's enchanting symphony.

*Synesthesia – A sensation produced in one modality when stimulus is applied to another modality; sound to color or scent to touch.

The Vulture

An undertaker at a funeral dirge,

the vulture, all black and shrouded,

bowed and wrinkled, like an old hag,

perched on its dilapidated throne and

looks on with ravishing hunger for any signs of life.

Resting under the Baobab tree, the man, shivering in fear and dread,

gazes up at the cloudy skies, knowing the end is near.

As the dry dust drifts slowly by in mourning march,

the vulture glides majestically, ready to strike.

Misshapen beak honed and long,

rheumy eyes, red and wild,

talons ready to carve fresh feast of flesh.

The prey prostrated petrified, waiting for the deadly thrust,

man and bird locked in a deadly game of life and death.

With the arid land of the Sahel visible for miles,

the vulture; king of the skies views his kingdom with pride.

Man in his misguided sense of power

proclaims himself lord of all he surveys,

but the monarch with wings regal and wide

knows he is master of the land and skies

because the dead and dying pay homage to only him.

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