

My Life Examined & Tweaked

The Honors Program
Senior Capstone Project
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April 2013

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ABSTRACT

My project is an exploration into my love of poetry. It consists of a collection of twenty-seven poems that I have written and revised over the course of a year. Over that time period, I have worked on approximately forty-five poems, but I chose only twenty seven for my final portfolio. To demonstrate what my writing process is like, I have kept a book (separate and apart from the final portfolio) of all my thoughts, inspirations, drafts and revisions for the poems I write, so that the growth of each can be seen.

The majority of my poems are in some way based on my life. They relate either to my own experiences (the people I have met, the place I have been) or my perspective on the experiences of others, which is why I have decided to call it “My Life Examined & Tweaked.” I moved to the United States from Jamaica recently and I have found that a lot of my poems are about my memories of Jamaica, or the issues associated with moving to another country. I explore these issues in a narrative reflection of four of my works: “Chamyu”, “I Meant to Say”, “Reclaim”, and “Quiver & Quail.” All of these poems deal with complications resulting from migration, with a particular emphasis on language and place and their impact on identity. I analyzed these poems in conjunction with the works of two my favorite authors, Bassey Ikpi’s “Homeward”, and Louise Bennett’s “Bans a Killing” and “Back to Africa”.

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MY LIFE

They ask if I have lived my life the best way
I could have lived it,
and I respond
No.
I have lived it the way I lived it.
With few regrets—
the world was already too dark for me to add my tar to it.
I didn't bring any sunshine either.
The world is no brighter place for
having me in it.
I have neither scorched its surface
nor planted new seeds
to be fertilized by the ashes.
I have lived
and **I** am better for it.

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EXAMINED:

Outside Poems Analyzed

Homeward

Basseyy Ikpi

Today, I remember my grandmother
as she attempts to connect with her second children.
She finds the only English words she knows
from somewhere hidden in the belly of her 4 foot 9 inch body
and instead of "Awonke"
she greets us with "Bye Bye."
Beckoning us into her *thin* clay colored arms.

Those arms mothered my mother
taught her how to mother me.
I inhale the history from her skin
and she tells me of a small scared girl
carried away on an iron bird to America.

Seems like that same bird has returned only to replace
that perfect girl with me.
This strange tongue tied woman,
the one that can barely say hello
without the clicks and moans,
the dips and tones,
of the white man's language.

It breaks my heart to realize that
I can only love her clearly in English.
But this is not my only tongue,
insolent and heavy with the awkward movements of amber waves.
East or West.
This is not my village
and my heart still longs for my grandmother's voice
steady and strong crossing rivers and oceans
rounding buildings of mud,
thatched roof,
steel
glass
concrete
confusion.
Yet I am afraid that it will not find me here
in this land ,

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miles from the one that welcomed me into this world
lifetimes before I existed in this cosmopolitan space.

"Nbong non yin ben yami?"

"Nbong non yin ben yami?"

What will I teach my children?

What will I tell them of where I've been?

The earth that shaped me,

the hands that held me.

What will they call home?

And will they hear it if and when it calls them.

Oklahoma.

D.C.

Brooklyn.

Will not help me remember

ikom

ugep

Calabar.

Will also not let me forget fingers sticky with fuu fuu
swallowed whole

tongue stinging numb from plantain fried in palm oil.

But I have lost the grit and the grain of my grandmother's gari.

I can't taste past this nostalgic lump in my throat.

I can't stomach the reality of this my divided culture.

African

American

I am everything

and I am nothing.

Nigeria is quietly begging me to remember

while America slowly urges me to forget.

But it's for my past

It's for my future

it is for my children

and it is for you

my grandmother,

that I must

always...

always...

remember.

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Bans a' Killin'

Louise Bennett

So yuh a de man me hear bout!
Ah yuh dem seh dah teck
Whole heap a English oat seh dat
yuh gwine kill dialec!
Meck me get it straight, mas Charlie,
For me no quite understand –
Yuh gwine kill all English dialec
Or jus Jamaica one?
Ef yuh dah equal up wid English
Language, den wha meck
Yuh gwine go feel inferior when
It come to dialec?
Ef yuh cyaan sing 'Linstead Market'
An 'Water come a me yeye'
Yuh wi haffi tap sing 'Auld lang syne'
An 'Comin through de rye'.
Dah language weh yuh proud a,
Weh yuh honour an respec –
Po Mas Charlie, yuh no know se
Dat it spring from dialec!
Dat dem start fi try tun language
From de fourteen century -
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialec dan we!
Yuh wi haffi kill de Lancashire,
De Yorkshire, de Cockney,
De broad Scotch and de Irish brogue
Before yuh start kill me!
Yuh wi haffi get de Oxford Book
A English Verse, an tear
Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
An plenty a Shakespeare!
When yuh done kill 'wit' an 'humour',
When yuh kill 'variety',
Yuh wi haffi fine a way fi kill
Originality!
An mine how yuh dah read dem English
Book deh pon yuh shelf,
For ef yuh drop a 'h' yuh mighta
Haffi kill yuhself!

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English Translation of Bans a' Killin'

So you're the man I hear about!
You're the one that's made
A whole lot of English oaths that say
You're gonna kill dialect!
Let me get it straight, Mr. Charlie,
For I don't quite understand –
Are you gonna kill all English dialects
Or just the Jamaican one?
If you've examined the English Language,
Then what makes you feel inferior when
it comes to dialects?
If you can't sing 'Linstead Market'
And 'Water come a me yeye'
Then we have to stop singing 'Auld lang syne'
And 'Comin through de rye'.
The language you are so proud of,
Which you honor and respect—
Poor Mr. Charlie, don't you see that
It springs from dialects!
They've tried to turn it into a language
From the fourteenth century –
Five hundred years have passed and now
They've got more dialects than we do!
You would have to kill the Lancashire,
The Yorkshire, the Cockney,
The broad Scotch and the Irish brogue
Before you start to kill me!
You would have to get the Oxford Book
Of English Verse and tear
Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
And lots of Shakespeare!
When you've finished killing 'wit' and 'humor',
When you've killed 'variety',
You will have to find a way to kill
Originality!
And how are you gonna read those English
Books there upon your shelf,
'Cause if you drop a 'h' you might
Have to kill yourself!

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Back to Africa

Louise Bennett

Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?
Yuh no know what yuh dah seh?
Yuh haffi come from somewhe fus
Before yuh go back deh!

Me know seh dat yuh great great great
Granma was African,
But Mattie, doan yuh great great great
Granpa was Englishman?

Den yuh great granmodder fader
By yuh fader side was jew?
An yuh granpa by yuh modder side
Was Frenchie parlez-vous?

But de balanca a yuh family,
Yuh whole generation,
Oonoo all bawn dung a Bung Grung -
Oonoo all is Jamaican!

Den is weh yuh gwine, Miss Mattie?
Oh, yuh veiw de countenance,
An between yuh an de Africans
Is great resemblance!

Ascorden to dat, all dem blue-yeye
White American
Who-for great granpa was Englishman
Mus go back to Englan!

What a debil of a dump-an-bore,
Rig-jig an palam-pam
Ef de whole worl start fi go back
Whe dem great granpa come from!

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English Translation of Back to Africa

Translator: Shana-Kay Smith

Back to Africa Miss Mattie?
Don't you know what you are saying?
You have to come from somewhere first
Before you can go back there.

I know that your great-great-great grandma was African,
But Mattie, wasn't your great-great-great-grandpa an Englishman?
And your great grandmother's father
By you father's side was a Jew?
And your grandpa by your mother's side
Was Frenchie parlez-vous?

But the rest of your family,
Your whole generation,
All of you were born in "Bung Grung"-
You are all Jamaican.

Then where are you going Miss Mattie?
Oh, you have viewed the countenance,
And between you and the Africans
Is great resemblance.

According to that logic all those blue-eyed
White Americans who's great grandpa's were Englishmen
Must go back to England!
What a circus it would be
if the whole world started to go back
where their great-grandpa came from.

If you are running from hard times,
Then take your chance, but Mattie, please,
Make sure you know where you come from
So that you have somewhere to return to!

Go abroad, seek your fortune,
But please don't tell anybody
That you are going to seek your homeland
Because you are right here.

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Language, Place and Identity

How we identify ourselves depends on the society we live in and the experiences that we have had; they shape the language we speak and our view of the place we live in. Place in this context refers to both the geographical positions and the cultural norms of these locations. Language is the means by which people communicate, and this varies by place. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, “A major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place” (8). I will be analyzing selected poems by Louise Bennett, Bassey Ikpi, and my own work, using Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s “*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*,” Jamaica Kincaid’s “*A Small Place*,” Paula M. L. Moya’s “*Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*,” and “*The Third Space*,” an interview with Homi Bhabha, to show the importance of language and place in our writings and the impact they have on identity.

To understand the poems under consideration you must understand where they come from, that is, the people who wrote them, and how language and place fits into their own lives and shapes their poetry. Bassey Ikpi was born in Cross River (Calabar), Nigeria. She moved to the United States when she was five years old, which is also when she started to learn English. She started writing when she was eight years old. Ikpi was still struggling with speaking English, and was better at writing it, so she used this as her means of communicating. She wrote the things she was unable to say. Her poetry tends to concern people and the personal

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issues that they deal with in their daily lives. Her main aim is to write poetry that others can connect to, so that they can see themselves in her work. She sees this as way of publicizing both her story and theirs (Ikpi).

Miss Louise Bennett is inarguably the most revered female poet in Jamaica's history and the most famous of all her contemporaries. She began writing poetry at an early age. Her first poems were in Standard English. At the age of fourteen, however, she decided to write in Jamaican Creole because of an incident on a bus when a woman spoke patois to her. She liked the way it sounded and how expressive it was, and so she made it her writing medium. Her poetry mostly deals with the everyday lives of Jamaicans. A lot of her work seems to be told from the perspective of the traditional “village gossip,” usually delivered as though the narrator was speaking to a friend, “giving the sense of a conversation...or monologue” (Ferguson 90). A comedienne as well, she often incorporates humor in her poetry, “poking fun at Jamaican habits” and forcing people to take note of their behavior and ways of thinking. While she incorporates humor into her writing, she rarely uses euphemisms, preferring to be direct.

I admire both poets, and enjoy their writing, which I feel is very approachable and creative. I also like the fact that I can relate to a lot of what they say in their poetry, which makes it more meaningful to me. I think I am able to relate to them because we have had some similar experiences in life. I was born and raised in Jamaica. I moved to the United States recently when I began attending college. I am able to relate to Bennett because we are both from Jamaica and we both speak the same language. Like Ikpi, I immigrated to the United States. I

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like to write about what I know; my poetry, therefore, emerges from my life experiences. In the words of Frieda Kahlo, I write about myself because “I am the subject I know best” (Watt). These shared experiences have led to shared themes throughout our poetry. The poems “Homeward,” “Bans A Killin,” “Chamyu,” “I Meant to Say,” and “Quiver & Quail” all speak about language, the importance of it, and how it shapes our national and cultural identity.

“Homeward” details Ms. Ikpi’s move from Nigeria to America as a young child. Decades later, she has become the by-product of Nigeria and America, a hybrid. Homi Bhabha describes hybridity as “the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the history that constitutes it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood” (211). Hybridity, therefore, results in the creation of something (or in this case someone) new; and this newness causes confusion not only the “hybrid,” but for others, as it or he/she is not really understood. Bhabha goes on to say that “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). In “Homeward,” Ikpi talks about the memories she has of her time in Nigeria, and how she is still trying to hold on to that aspect of her culture as she says, “Nigeria quietly begs [her] to remember.” While Ikpi has said that she started writing poetry because she was unable to communicate in English well, in this poem, the opposite is true. Now, she “can only love [her grandmother] clearly in English.”

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The struggle with language can similarly be seen in my own poems “Quiver and Quail,” “I Meant to Say,” and “Chamyu.” “Quiver and Quail” talks about the struggles that I have speaking Standard English, and the emotional turmoil that results. “Chamyu” similarly details my struggles with Standard English, but the main concept in this poem is my dislike of being on display when I speak Jamaican Creole. “I Meant to Say” again speaks to my troubles with Standard English, but the main concept here is my anger towards people who critique the way I speak and feel as though their way of speaking is better.

In my poems and Ikpi’s, we both encounter language problems due to immigrating to the United States. We also both experience guilt from speaking English, though for different reasons. She experiences guilt because she can now only speak English; she “can barely say hello without the clicks and moans/ the dips and tones of the white man’s language.” I experience guilt because I choose to speak English, “each accent on my traitorous tongue committing the greatest treachery of all” (Quiver and Quail). It is as though by her forgetting, and me choosing not to speak a certain way, we have betrayed our cultures. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, “A valid active sense of self may have been eroded by *dislocation* resulting from migration.... or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial and cultural model” (9). The language we speak is part of our identity. It is also the way we express ourselves and form connections with people. Communicating in a different language is something that is required when you leave your native country. Even if you move to a place that speaks the same language, how that language is spoken there will still vary. The English spoken in England is not the English spoken in the

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United States. The Spanish spoken in Spain is not the Spanish spoken in Venezuela. By living outside your country and speaking a different language you are able to form new connections with others, but this comes at a cost, as you may lose the connections you had in your native country. Ikpi seems to mourn the fact that she has lost this part of her identity. The experience is even more tragic because she has in turn lost some of the connection that she has to her grandmother and “it breaks [her] heart to realize that/ [she] can only love her [grandmother] clearly in English.”

Similarly, Bennett’s “Bans a Killin” looks at English as a kind of treachery. This poem speaks about the importance of Jamaican dialect to the Jamaican culture and individuals. The protagonist in the poem is Mas Charlie, who seems to have a low regard for Jamaican Creole. The Jamaican dialect is a strong part of Jamaican culture. It draws predominantly on English and various West African languages. This poem is a counter to the critiques of her contemporaries who admonished her for trying to popularize a “vulgar” language. Bennett attributed the lack of respect for Jamaica’s dialect to its relation to its African heritage. Many people of her time thought that what was African was bad (Chang). Jamaican Creole was the language of the poor and illiterate.

Bennett felt that the widespread but underappreciated dialect was more expressive than Standard English. “Standard English has always been seen as the language of power and authority since colonial times”; it is regarded as the language of “the cultured” (Ferguson88). According to Miss Bennett, “Part of the problem is that most people have failed to realize that the English language which they cherish is based on a series of dialects” (The Jamaican

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Observer). Speaking to the fact that just as the Jamaican dialect was derived from (mostly) English and West African languages, she points out that so too was English derived from German and Latin. Also, just like patois, it was once seen as the bastardized and inferior language of laymen. Mas Charlie is ashamed of the dialect, but it is clear that the narrator is proud. This can be seen when the narrator states that if you kill the dialect you would be killing “wit...humour...variety... [and] originality.” “Bans a Killin”, “Quiver & Quail”, and “Homeward” looks at local languages as something to be proud of, even though it is hard given the negative feedback that surrounds them.

The theme of forgetting and remembering is strong in all three poems. Ikpi is unable to remember her language and feels guilty for forgetting. In “Bans a Killin,” however, Mas Charlie is able to remember, but wants to forget. This contrast is due to their diverging views of their identity. Ipki loves her Nigerian heritage, and wants to reconnect with that part of her identity. Mas Charlie, on the other hand, wants to be disassociated from his identity. But his is not a problem of national identity, like me and Ikpi; he has issues which originate from post-colonialism. It does not seem as though Mas Charlie has problems with being Jamaican. But Jamaica has been heavily influenced from years of being a British colony. It is, however, unable to separate itself from its African roots. Mas Charlie favors the “British” side of Jamaica. This can be seen when the narrator says “Dah language weh yuh proud a/ Weh yuh honour and respect (The language you are proud of/ The one you honor and respect).” He views the colonizer’s way of speaking as far superior, which is why he wants to “kill dialect.” Jamaica Kincaid views this as “the most painful” result of colonialism. She states that the

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“former” colonies have “no tongue. For isn’t it odd that the only language that [we] have in which to speak is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?” (31).

We can also see the concept of hybridity here, and the issues associated with it. The Jamaican language is a hybrid one, drawing upon both English and West African languages. This hybridity is a point of turmoil for Mas Charlie. He has both English and West African roots, but does not want to claim them. This is in complete contrast to Ikpi who embraces both sides of her culture. Yet she too seems to be in turmoil, as she states “African/ American/ I am everything/ and I am nothing.” Ikpi seems to be struggling to understand her identity, but unlike Mas Charlie she does not reject it.

In my poems, as with Ikpi’s, the root issue is one of national identity. It is not a matter of how I identify myself, as I am, without a doubt, Jamaican. It is where I was born, where I grew up, and the only place I legally have citizenship – I am not an American citizen. For me it is a matter of where I feel comfortable identifying myself in that way. Unlike Mas Charlie, I am not ashamed of my identity; I love and embrace it. As I state in “Quiver & Quail,” “was I ashamed?/ is that what you believed?/ I just wanted to remain unlabeled.” My conflict comes from feeling like I am on display. Moving to another country has made me become the “other,” and this identity is reflected in the ways people look to me as an example of an exotic foreign culture.

The way I speak is “different so it is interesting/ but ethnic and taboo” (I Meant to Say). This brings up issues of whether there is a proper place or forum to speak the way I normally

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would, which is part of my national identity. Should I only be Jamaican in Jamaica? When I speak a certain way, am I not to be true to myself? These internal conflicts can be seen in all three poems. I feel as though speaking Jamaican dialect is “something only to be shared with my own people” because in that setting it is the norm; in that setting I am not the “other” (Chamyu).

For me, Standard English is not something that comes naturally in a casual setting: “no, it doesn’t come naturally/ not the words/ no not the words” (Quiver & Quail). Standard English is the official language of Jamaica; it is spoken in schools, at work, and formal settings. It is also the written language. Jamaican Creole has no orthography; therefore, even in writing this paper I think and write in Standard English. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffins attribute this to the fact that “the imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities” (7). But for most Jamaicans, Creole is what is spoken at home. It is, therefore, what comes most naturally to me. That is not to say that Standard English feels unnatural, but using it in every setting, both formal and informal, is. I believe that people are only truly themselves in informal settings. Formal settings have rules and codes of conduct that we all abide by. This is the root of my conflict; I feel as though I am unable to truly be myself, even when I am supposed to be able to. According to Bhabha, “Hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them” (216). Yet as I mentioned before, the main purpose of language is to communicate. Despite these feelings of guilt that I have, I see no point in speaking a language that no one can understand. Overcoming differences with pronunciation is hard

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enough. Also, like anyone else, I want to fit in. But trying to fit in and to not stand out seems like a betrayal of what I perceive as the true me, my true identity.

Similar issues can be seen in Ikpi's "Homeward." After being "carried away on an iron bird to America" she assimilated to the culture here, and in doing so she lost her language, she lost part of her identity. My anguish in "Quiver & Quail" also comes from the fear that I may lose that part of myself permanently. I do not believe that I will forget how to speak Creole, or to understand it. But I fear that it may no longer come naturally; that Standard English will become my new comfort zone, and that thought makes me uncomfortable, as it is in complete contrast to who I was, and how I perceive myself to be.

The issues encountered in my poems and Ikpi's stem from immigrating to another country. We have given up "home" to become "other." Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin state that, "The most widely shared...practice within which... alienation can be identified is the construction of 'place'. The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language...this gap occurs for those whose language...has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power" (9). This shows that there is a strong relationship between language and place, and they both have an impact on identity. The role of place in the way we view ourselves can be most clearly seen in Ikpi's "Homeward," my "Reclaim," and Bennett's "Back to Africa." All three speak about the importance of "home" to a person. "Homeward" speaks about the effects that moving from Nigeria to America has had on Ikpi. She has lost her ability to speak her native language and "desire will not help [her] remember what the words taste like." But she still has vivid memories of Nigeria, the place. She states

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that “Oklahoma, D.C., Brooklyn... will not let me forget fingers sticky with fuu fuu [a traditional Nigerian food] swallowed whole.”

While “Homeward” is a rehashing of good memories for Ikpi, my “Reclaim” and Bennett’s “Back to Africa” are critiques of people who do not embrace where they come from. “Back to Africa” talks about “Miss Mattie” and her intention to move “back” to Africa to reconnect to her roots despite never having been there. It is a comical critique of the “Back to Africa Movement,” which encouraged people of African heritage to “return” to Africa, a place that purportedly would be more accepting of them given the racial tensions in North America at the time. Similarly, “Reclaim” tells the story of someone who has immigrated to another country, hoping for a better life, while scorning the place of his/her birth in the process. The persona realizes soon, however, that the place he/she had longed to be is not as good as the place they are coming from. Like “Back to Africa” it critiques longing to be in a place you do not know much about. All three poems speak of missing home, but what is home? Is it the place where you are born? Is it the place where have spent the majority of your life? Or is it the place to which you feel you have a historical connection?

Ikpi identifies Nigeria as her home, despite having spent the majority of her childhood and her entire adulthood in America. She says that America is “not her village.” In Bennett’s work Miss Mattie identifies Africa as her home, even though she has never been there. Miss Mattie sees Africa as her historical home; she believes that she should return to the land of her ancestors, the land of black people, because she would encounter less discrimination there. Bennett mocks her for this line of thinking. She states that “Yuh haffi come from somewhe

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fus/ Before yuh can go back deh! (You have to come from somewhere first/ Before you can go back there!).” The speaker encourages Mattie to know where she comes from, so that she will be able to return home one day.

In my poem “Reclaim,” I characterize home as the place where you are from, the place where you are raised. I believe that home does not necessarily have anything to do with the place you are born. I think home is where you grew up. It is the where you have spent the majority of your childhood and adolescence. We are all products of the society we grow up in, so whether you were born there are not, that place shapes who you are. Our home, therefore, shapes our identities. Ikpi disagrees, as she still identifies Nigeria as her home despite spending very little of her life there. She even asks “What will I teach my children?/ What will they call home?” Here she is asking if her children will call Nigeria, her home, *their* home, or if they will consider the United States their home, instead. There seems to be a strong correlation between memories, both good and bad, and what each protagonist considers home. Moya states that “An individual’s experiences will influence, but not entirely determine, the formation of her cultural identity” (137). She also states that “Identities are ways of making sense of our experiences” (138). Our experiences and the places we associate with those experiences are, therefore, strong determinants of how we identify.

Ikpi recounts her enjoyable childhood memories; they are the main things still connecting her to Nigeria. The foods she ate, the landscape, her memories of her grandmother, are all good experiences that Ikpi had, and these seem to be the main reason she still identifies as Nigerian. In “Back to Africa,” the narrator seems to believe that Miss Mattie is running from “hard

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times,” which is why she wants to go to Africa and why she is calling it her home. Miss Mattie is associating Jamaica with bad memories. She hopes to create better ones in Africa. This is Miss Mattie’s way of making sense of her experiences. In “Reclaim,” the persona leaves her home in hopes of having a better life in another country. He/she is unable to “retain the good memories...as though it were all bad.” By the end of the poem, the persona longs for home, as his/her experience has not been as good as they thought it would be. All three poems associate home with good experiences, and bad experiences are not associated with home.

We speak the language of the place we are in so as to communicate. According to Moya, “Identities are neither self-evident, unchanging, and uncontestable, nor are they absolutely fragmented, contradictory, and unstable. Rather, identities are subject to multiple determinations and to a continual process of verification which takes place over the course of an individual through her interaction with the society she lives in” (139). Language and place are, therefore, not the only determinants of our identities, but they are important factors. Changes in these factors, such as moving between places can, therefore, lead to miscommunication, internal conflict, and displacement of our views of home and that further complicates how a person self-identifies.

& TWEAKED: JAMAICA FROM FOREIGN

Reclaim

A critique of the Back to Africa Movement and modern views of cultural heritage

How can you claim a place you know so little about
yet separate yourself from your place of birth?

A place so deeply rooted in your veins
you deny it as though ashamed
try to wash it from your hands
as though unable to contain
your deep hatred
as though unable to retain
the good memories
as though you were in pain
as though it was all bad
but it wasn't all bad.

So your body follows to that place
your heart has already immigrated to.
A place your taste buds reject
and your eyes have yet to acclimatize to.
Your toes curl in anguish
with each step walked on the unfamiliar surface.
Your heart has already returned home,
taking with it your hopes, dreams and joy,
leaving your chest devoid and hardened
but your frail body weakened.
It left your mind in shambles but reinforced it with pride
instructing your feet not to backtrack
to leave your past in the past
as your heart whispers to the wind
and prays to the sky
for your safe return home.

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Chamyu

Can they hear it in my voice?
The fakeness.
Can they hear it's not really me speaking?
As though I had a winning script
before my eyes.
One invisible to your own.
No words can defend except....
I feel exposed
as though I were an unwilling actor in a play
on an unlevelled stage,
hot lights burning my lips
encouraging me not to speak
because every time I acquiesced
it was as if I told you something you shouldn't hear
something only to be shared
with my own people,
our tongues entwined
as we spoke something divine
unfit for the ears of outsiders
those who could not understand
the fluctuations in tones
the speed of the serpentine syllables
weaving through the air
to a welcoming ear.
You want to know what was said?
The meaning of these indelicate sounds?
Chamyu chamyu ye tu...

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I meant to say....

Can you hear it in my voice every time I say
“It’s over there”
instead of saying “It deh deh so”?
Every time I was ready to kiss my teeth but
resisted the impulse.
Every time I didn’t point with my chin or mouth
but with my index finger.

But there are still some things that slip through the cracks.
Yes,
I really did just tell you to lock that door
when all I wanted you to do was close it.
Yes,
the rain is falling,
it is not just raining.
Yes,
that girl’s hair is tall not long.

No stop,
just stop right there.
No you don’t need to teach me English.
Yes,
it really is my first language
and better too than your bastardized one.

You don’t understand because
it was not meant to be understood by you
but mostly because you don’t try to.
You say you want to know
but don’t care if you’ve been lied to.
It’s different so it is interesting
but ethnic and taboo.
Wondering if when I said something I was talking about you....
Where do you come in?
Where do you fit in?
As I wonder
how this became about you.

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Quiver & Quail

Can you hear it?
That quiver in my voice when I speak.
That slight uncertainty?
That shiver of my larynx.
Can you see that crack in my bravado
as I enunciate each syllable?
No, it doesn't come naturally,
not the swords,
no, not the words.
Each accent on my traitorous tongue
committing the greatest treachery of all.
An effrontery really.

My tongue tasting the treachery
is forced to curl each syllable.
My teeth
unused to the unusual unfurling
draws blood
punishing.
My throat
sore from the saccharine unfamiliar tones and pitches
tries to hold back the vomit.
Putrid.
Wretched.
My heart moaned slightly,
singing a morose song
of a battle lost
and of the pain to be caused in the bouts to be waged
in the war
still raging.

My voice a POW in my chest
cowering...
unable to escape but unwilling to speak those words.
They were too crass
too short
clipped
not enough
spoken too fast
in conjunction with a mind too slow
unwilling to draw attention
refusing to put on a show.

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Was I ashamed?
Is this what you believed?
I just wanted to remain unlabeled
unrefined
yet undefined
a word unable to be broken down in syllables
yet to be found in any dictionary.

But somehow you would know,
somehow you would find out.
Then you would inevitably ask
“Can you say something in your native tongue?”
Most times I would refuse
as I become uncomfortable.
Unable to speak
what I believe should remain unspoken
as I wonder
why do you want to know?

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My Father's Boots

Bulky & brown,
nothing to recommend them.
Worn and torn
I hated them.
Dirty,
never clean,
but you always wore them,
adored them even,
I could never see why.

I touched them once.
The coarse material rubbed my skin,
the heat from a long day's work
gave my fingertips a surprise twinge.
The smell,
stink with sweat,
holding on to memories of hard labor,
forgetting dreams of something else,
the heel worn down by time
like the hulk of your shoulders.

The boots were obstinate,
never giving out,
winning slim victories in their war
against the harsh asphalt.
I remember the creases and scars that mimicked,
quite perfectly,
your pain-wracked face in the end,
as your footprints ceased,
and your feet finally rested.

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Shards Unbroken

I have never really gotten to know him
that tall brooding figure.
“Banana” he would call me
in his rough gravelly voice
as he lifted me up
and held me in those hands
I held so dear.
They felt splintered
uneven
like the pieces of wood he used to carve out.
They spelled out the hard life he had endured
but their firmness and gentleness
would reassure you of his good nature.
His feet are calloused
so many miles walked in his boots
the bruises forming a pattern
reminiscent of the miles he had walked barefoot.
My father is a silent stoic kind of man
never complaining
always sunny
not raining
in his view.
The cataracts in his eyes
the diabetes in his veins
obstacles that could never restrain him.
Always assuring me in that familiar voice that he was okay
all the pain bearable
his body a vessel of the unspoken
the mysterious and unknowable...
I pray it shatters.

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My Father's Child

A poem about my "sister"

As a child the thought of her excited me -
it was no fun being the only girl.
Who was she?
What was she like?
I knew little of her.

Over the years my excitement faded and
left only a faint curiosity which
too sluggishly eroded with time.
I had seen her twice in my life.
First, when she visited my home
and a few years later at my brother's funeral.
Twice I perceived her as nothing but a stranger.

Now as I stand dutifully over her grave
beside my mourning father
I became enveloped by sadness.
A sadness at the fact I would never cry at her sorrows,
never feel joy in the face of her happiness.
That I would never 'feel' for her.
And even now as I stand above her grave,
I cannot shed the tears I believe we owe the dead.

But as I walked away,
something chaotic and confusing
rose inside of me.
Harsh in its savagery and suddenness,
yet ending in an anticlimactic single drop
that nevertheless surprised me,
until I realized that it was the breaking
of that feeble connection I had to her –
a vicarious one,
through my father.

It hurt to see my father's 6ft frame
bereft of its usual strength,
and his face deprived of its usual smile.
My heart called to him,
convulsed in his anguish
but turned away –
quite guiltily,
at the nothingness it felt for his daughter.

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Childish Life

A life not long lived,
but it was a happy life –
a simple life.

My mother hid me away from the world –
it was no place for a child.
In the later years of my life,
the shield which held strong for over a decade
against the onslaught of the outside world
was unable to cope with the lashings any longer,
and with a last, mournful, whimper,
the shield shattered.

I looked in dismay at the other side,
my reproachful eyes seeking out my mother,
unable to understand why she had kept this side hidden away.
Pain and suffering was always there
I just couldn't see it.
She didn't want me to see it.
She raised me in the shadows,
clothed burped and fed by deniability.
But my eyes soften upon seeing her arms,
so badly bruised and battered from the onslaught,
shaking
from the weight it held up for so long,
not with the strength of hard muscles,
but with the resilience of soft defiance.
In the years following my enlightenment,
I finally understood my mother's actions
and tried in vain to find the splinters
so I could put the shield back together again.
But too much time had passed and
I could only find shards in the small corners
the broom had been unable to reach.

Now in reflection of a life long gone
I realize it was a life not long lived,
but it was enough.
A happy life, but not overly so.
A simple life, with a taint of complexity.
A life mostly lived in the dark,
who needs light anyway?

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Grandmother

Grandma,
how different you are now than you were then.
The kindness of dementia has started to set in
as your life stories flow without end.
You've gotten so much older.
Your legs more frail
shaking
under the weight of your belly,
impossibly, so much bigger.
Your predictions of your imminent death
have grown much more constant,
and I fear much more accurate.
Your face continues to droop in its sorrow.
Your hand weighted down from the rigors of
ten children
and 24 grandchildren.

The arthritis got hold of your sore feet
and at first you tried to pull away
but now you've let it win.
They lay stationary
and weak every day
on their own makeshift bed.

But somehow
your eyes have grown much kinder.
Liquid glasses
always looking away,
looking back at the past and
away from the morbid future.
Your voice has gotten sweeter
relinquishing the stern melodies and overbearing words
of my childhood.
Your demeanor so much more pleasant.
Your presence,
once unfortunate and ubiquitous
is now pleasing
as your crinkled nose and wrinkled lips
repeatedly regaled anyone who would listen with your story.
With your life
with your suffering
your struggles,
as they listened

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with understanding of how delicate skin can turn to leather.
As you cried of how your stomach
stiffened
from the mud you ate to assuage your hunger.
Hardened.
Of how you have worked so much
enjoyed so much
lived too long
but also too little.

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Grandfather

Age had slowed his movements
slurred his words
tweaked his spine a little bit,
But made his resolve unbending.
His mind was made up about the world.

“Miss World” he would call me
and I would smile.
Sometimes he would *ease himself*
and as I ran away
“Good food” he would say
and he would smile.

Moments like those erased his inequities.
Put him on an alter in my memories,
but time had yet to scour my brain completely
and those bleak times clung to the corners of my mind,
unveiling themselves at the most inconvenient of times.

Rum.
It was his answer to everything.
Swollen foot?
“Put some rum on it”
Insect bite?
“A touch of rum”
Full body ache?
“This time drink it”
Lost your faith?
“A quart a day”
Broken marriage?
“Add a pint”
Until one day his cure all
finally killed him
and took away his pain.

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Mrs. Alcock and her Son

I wonder how she must feel
walking in those halls every day.
Does she see him at each corner?
Does his voice rattle her eyes?
Her only son
now dead
all that was left now were the memories,
abstract thoughts that he was once here.

She was my English teacher.
Strict but fair
kind
but not to many
and never overly so.

Her son had followed in her footsteps.
He became a teacher,
not overly dedicated.
A religious man,
zealous in his Catholicism.
A maverick,
never a follower
with ideas of a whoring Christ
who was way cooler than others like to portray –
a more human Christ.

“Service is the rent we pay for being on Earth”
was his motto,
and in his own way
he lived by it.
He was not perfect
his frail body a façade.
His spirit
his temper
his beliefs
were strong like his eyes
brawling like his unrepentant tongue
but refined like his slim fingers
constantly gliding through his hair.

His life was more unexpected than his death,
it was not a surprise for her.
But as his mother,

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it must have hurt.
It still must hurt.
As she walks every day where he walked,
as she traces the fading footprints of flesh,
now mere bones in a box.

As I look at you now
three years since
your eyes have sunken in more.
Your face does not even bother with the pretense of a smile.
I wonder if it has just been another bad day,
or are they all bad now?
Like a never-ending nightmare of memories.
I wonder if you float through your nightmares aimlessly,
and if your blanket,
thick in its beliefs of good works and an afterlife
has grown tattered and torn.

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Principal Vera “Kill’a” Buckley

Dark skin
Stern face
Slight Build
Red lipstick
Teeth unfailingly stained by the prior.
Small waist
Bald head
Brown eyes
Scrawny legs
Fragile hands raised up in ire.
A slap here
A slap there
Bruised hands
Fresh wales
Her presence always resulted in tears.
Nervous eyes
Trembling lips
Unmoving tongues
Shivering legs
She had permanently instilled fear.
Brown belt
Black whip
Tree branch
Wooden cane
She had various methods to inflict pain.
Echoing stings
Loud screams
Heartfelt pleas
Flooding tears
As I begged for the end in vain.

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The Chill of Home

It's so hard to call this place my home,
this place devoid of mangoes, guineps, or sweetsops.
This place so dry and cold.
My skin irked by the air
which torturously causes it to crack,
and the layers upon layers of clothing
which wrings dry
of what little moisture it had managed to hide away.
This place with its beautiful petals of snow
and thorns of ice.

How can I call this place my home?
This place where buildings obliterate the sky
so much different from the outlines of the trees
which enhanced its mystery.
This place where sometimes the sun is stubborn
and refuses to rise before 8am
and in its laziness sets at 4pm
after playing tricks on the eyes
but refusing to extend the same courtesy to my body.
Shining brightly in the sky
unwilling to allow the heat to transcend the clouds
all while laughing at me and my ignorance.

How can I call this place my home?
This place where death is only mourned
never celebrated for the life lived
and the one forthcoming.
A place where God is only half-way there
and the other half is encouraged to put their faith in men
but I could never put my faith in something so filthy.

I don't think this place
even with its people with accents
so different
but timbre so friendly –
could ever be my home.

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Ugly Road

Goodbye ugly road.
I walked on you for over two decades now,
jumping over your deep grooves
which only grew deeper and wider
and more comfortable
through years of neglect.
I remember my days as a child
refusing to walk on you,
only running was allowed
barefoot.
My feet slapping the pavement
the heat of your skin encouraging me to go faster
to reach my destination a bit quicker.

I remember the day they repaired you
and how a month after
you were back to your good old self.
Have you missed my feet recently ugly road?
For I have missed your beautiful blisters
that lead me to that wonderful place called home.

I remember how forlorn I felt
walking up your slightly tilted back,
the sun refusing to show my hung head
any relief,
but that sadness would morph into joy
as I neared #88
my birth place
my birth date.
Ugly road,
never think I have forgotten
much less forgiven
your own indifference to my absence.

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Ruralized

Chickens roamed the ground.
Dogs roamed the chickens
their feet accustomed to the
rocks reminiscent of ruins.
There were pigs tied to the west
Three goats tied to the east
\$8000 a head.
Sprinkled throughout were a
pitch patch of fruit trees
some bare
some blooming
but of course my favorites were
out of commission for the season.

On top of the hill
perched the house.
Years of weathering had given the floorboards
a feeling that it was not quite rooted.
Meals were cooked on an open fire
The outdated stove served only as decoration.
If only they had a bathroom for the same
purpose instead of a never ending pit
that accommodated echoes.

Service poles avoided the area.
No doubt turned off by its reputation.
No internet.
No cable.
Unkempt bushes instead of
manicured gardens.
All of it a far cry from everything I had known
yet so much closer to the one.

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Coreville

A sad face peruses Coreville's streets in these happy times.
Blistered bare feet moving forward
in time with outstretched dry hands
as blind apathy saunters past with a distinct "clop!"
and annoyance relinquishes spare change but no spare time.

Pride has no place here,
hunger had gnawed it bare.
Salt could not compare to the bile
that raged against his insides long
devoid of ham and sorrel.

He turns away as he sees his reflection in the storefront
outlined by red and green flashing lights
and resumed his spot in the world with the sun still high.
He closes his eyes as the cool air teases the hair on his exposed calf
unable to cope with his forced austerity.
Merry...
indeed.

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King Street

Derelict buildings,
now homes for the poor,
the makeshift doors,
signs the rich lived there no more.

Decades of dirt and neglect
hugging the architecture,
hiding the 19th century flourishes.
They have seen a myriad of coats
pitch patches here and there.
Scratches proliferated their skin
12 inch scars –
no mere flesh wounds
biographies of the foundation they stood on.

So easy to pass by,
so easy not to see,
what it once was,
what it was meant to be.

But for those who looked hard enough,
for those who stopped to stare,
they could see the rich old building,
nose still firmly in the air,
the sash windows glinting,
still hinting,
of that regal Victorian flair.

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Mango Time

May to July
the most important quarter.
Nothing can stop it
no sorrow despoil it
as the faint aroma spreads
and you lick the air.

The blossoms announce their imminent arrival
as the pollen spreads the news,
spurred on by the wind,
as they come closer and closer.

First *Hairy* arrives
just barely beating out the *Greenskin*.
Julie came early this year
trailing *Bombay*
the *East Indian* finds his way back
the *Number Elevens* shone with a touch of black.

The *Robins* with their coat of green and blood red
- at times marred with yellow
was always last but far more unique.
Unfit for biting,
better for drinking,
smiles erupt as the sweet taste touches the tongue,
only slightly put off by the cringe that followed
the sour aftertaste.
Yes! Finally!
It's Mango Time.

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I Am Hungry

My lazy body refuses to nourish itself,
well at least to take any significant part in the process.
I long for a mango
ripe and juicy
yellow
filling.
My knight in my war against hunger
champion of my laziness.
Peel.
That's all there was to it.
Peel to the core
of sticky fluid
that has permanently stained so many shirts –
laziness hated laundry too.
It pictured the ill-shaped yellow mark as a badge of honor
as a memory,
a memory it relishes now.
That mango was now out of reach
no longer just a mindless walk to the front yard
but a deliberate drive to that building that only carried one flavor
not even half as good.

That building
so detached from every object it housed,
putting food on a pedestal
as though to distract from the ugliness
of the dead and dying fruits
separated from their stalks of life.
Bruised skin potentially hiding the rot
as you peel the flesh
you must throw the seed,
the skin,
the whole damn thing in the bin,
to zip line after your lost dollar.
There are trees all around me
tall and majestic
beautiful.
A spectacle which draws my gaze to the unfamiliar display,
but the branches I cannot reach
are as barren as the rough dry trunks
with no stooped holes for my feet
my airborne dreams dashed from the beginning
I am still hungry.

The Queen is Coming

I got up that morning,
white clouds loitered around the tepid blue skies,
a predictably ordinary day.
But as I walked on I noticed a subtle difference,
bursts of activity from place to place.
The tin men had been oiled –
construction workers worked with purpose
neon men assaulted the roads with asphalt.
The craters in the streets
were finally being tended to.
Camouflaged men roamed the streets
unable to camouflage their dissatisfaction.
Had a government actually heeded to needs of its people?
No!
The Queen was coming!
Stockholm syndrome –
an abused child singing the praises of his mother
Jamaica,
a colony still in these post-colonial times.
Political hypocrites,
not champions of the people
but slaves to the Queen.
Our land,
a tiny dot on the map
a dirty speck in the Queen's eyes
yet we must bow and scrape as she returns
to a land she neglected and ruled in
name only.
Her impending arrival prompting an economic stimulus
that stimulated the eyes,
but retarded the brain.
The useless Governor General
had a purpose again.
Yes... the Queen was coming.

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Untitled

Jamaica, May 2010

Boom! Bang! Bang! Bang!

We had been warned,
but the urgency of the warnings versus the reality
were like paradoxes.

I closed my eyes and saw it all ...

burning...disintegrating.

My mind filled with fear until fear decide to take
leave of absence and trepidation served as substitute.

Dozens dead already,

2 police stations fire bombed,

curfews enacted,

a State of Emergency declared,

freshly painted red lines now divided the street.

The sun set,

dozens more now dead.

The night did nothing to curb the staccato of steel
that sang me to bed and woke me 3 hours later.

I reunited with God again,

but the path to Church was guarded by armed men.

Lifeless bodies coated the streets,

John Crows surrounded and worshipped their feast,

while neglected dogs lapped at their tears in search of something to eat.

And so I lay on my back,

helpless and waiting,

listening and praying,

as another sun set

and another steely song ,

bombs serving as background singers,

put me to bed .

But the next day silence jerked me from my restless sleep,
the silence of agony drunkenly dispersed from place to place.

The news announced to cheers that he had been captured

but at 7pm that happiness subsided to a numbing gloom

as we heard the news headlines:

“Over 100 estimated dead”,

lifeless target practice buried in unmarked mass graves,

“Over 50 persons including women and children hospitalized”,

blindfolded soldiers shot unbiased bullets,

“100 people missing”,

most likely the pieces stacked like Jenga in the streets,

“Garrisons decry police brutality”,

the mother hens have ravaged their young,

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“And Dudus finally captured unharmed”,
the anti-sacrifice of the anti-Christ.
“Stay tuned”.

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Soldiers Serve not Protect

You were one of us
normal and ordinary
just a flicker of life that eventually blows out
but somewhere you turned
they armed your mind against us
camouflaged you in lies and manipulation
gave you a false sense of pride
that you fought for your people.
But when we turned our backs on *them*
they commanded *you* to shatter it with bullets
leaving holes which you swiftly filled with your betrayal.
Stinging as it forced its way through –
you now fought for your country,
not the people,
one in which only *their* rights to life was upheld.
The myth of citizenship finally comes to light
as you extinguish ours.

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Heartfelt

If I wrote a poem from my heart of hearts,
what would you hear?
What would you feel?
Would it make your own heart shiver
and my own ears bleed?
Could I be completely honest with myself,
let you know what I really think?
Will the words be enough to express it?
Will my voice muster the bravado needed to carry it off
or will it falter, burn, and sink?
Will my throat become constricted
before I even utter the first syllable?
Red and sore from shouting for all the wrong causes
damaged and torn
from all the words
I meant to say...
should have said.
Hard words that should have been said to give you a reality check,
to straighten your spine.
Soft ones to soothe your sore eyes.
Motivational ones to irritate your blocked ears
and inspire your swollen feet into action
Will this poem end in regret?
Will I regret writing it?
Will you read it?
Feel between the lines?
Will it provoke your own heart?
So gritty and unrefined
both erratic and unsynchronized
beating without/against time.

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Do I Matter?

You know when you matter
when someone calls your name
each syllable individually accented
each note familiar.

You know when you matter
when they do that one thing
that brainwashes you
makes you forget all the bad things
they have done
and those most assuredly forthcoming.

You know you matter
when you are unreasonable
and rationalize to the point of irrationality
but they understand
even if they disagree with you.

Your shrill tone devours my name
as my mind begs for *fine*.
Pleading for a respite
from the images of your last transgression
slowly playing
stirring my mind to a simmer
always teetering on boiling.

You hear what I say
not quite listening,
your face reeking of sympathy,
always absent of empathy –
pity.
My pride,
tired of taking a battering
steps away from the line of fire
no longer shielding my judgment,
I know now,
you should not matter.

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Smile

“Smile” they said,
I hid behind my mother in fear.
“Come on smile sweetie pie.”
No! Go away!
“Come on, you can’t hide behind Mommy forever.”
Yes I can, now move.
“Don’t be shy.”
I’m not shy, I’m scared, there’s a difference.
“I won’t hurt you.”
But that’s exactly what you’re doing.

I never could understand why they told me to smile,
if I was sad I would cry.
Their constant harping was annoying,
they just kept on pecking and pecking,
and I being so small,
my feathers not yet fully formed,
was unable to fly away.
My mother’s wing covering me reluctantly –
the lovable traitor was on their side.

Over a decade has passed and I’m still being told
“Smile.”
Why?
“It’s free you know?”
I wouldn’t pay for it.
“Why are you always frowning?”
That’s just the way my face is.
“You never laugh at my jokes”
You’re not as funny as you think.
“What would make you smile?”
You not telling me to.
“Are you sad?”
No, but now I’m angry.

And as they walked away
confounded by my face
so constantly devoid of emotion,
I smiled.

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Shana-Kay Smith

Brown eyes
big lips
average height
wide hips
black hair perpetually entwined
with feelings.
Filled with faltering hopes and beliefs
with ever-growing dreams
and tears
wrenched
so coldly
from my eyes.
The moist wind caressing my skin
pushing me on
yet stripping me of the will to do so.
I want to leave here,
I want to stay,
in the dark crevices of my heart –
reveling in the challenge.
Failure?
Quite unlikely.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Personal Interview with Bassey Ikpi

Interviewer: Shan-Kay Smith

Interviewee: Bassey Ikpi

Date: February 15, 2013

Interview Setting: Telephone interview

Length: 19mins 04secs

Transcriber: Shana-Kay Smith

(Start of Interview)

Ikpi: Hello.

Smith: Hello.

Ikpi: How are you?

Smith: I'm good thank you.

Ikpi: Can you hear me okay?

Smith: Yes. It's fine.

Ikpi: Okay. Awesome.

Smith: So how was your trip?

Ikpi: It was fantastic. It was absolutely fantastic. I didn't want to come back. But everything has to end at some point.

Smith: Yeah. Well, I just have a few questions because I'm doing a project. I am writing my own poetry and also I chose three female poets that I like, and I'm just looking at basically the writing process. So that's what these questions are geared towards. So for the first question...when and why did you start writing poetry?

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Ikpi: I started writing poetry when I was eight. That is when I wrote my first poem I should say. Like my first, you know, conscious, “This is a poem poem.” Writing because I learned to speak English when I was five, and I remember very distinctly the difference between not being able to understand anybody around me, and then suddenly learning the language and being able to communicate. So that portion of inability to communicate, it stuck with me like literally my whole life. So writing became very important to me because I learned to read and write and speak English all around the same time. Until when I started reading and I saw how effective words were and how these things, this language that I didn’t even know a couple months ago, was able to tell all these different stories. It taught me about the power of storytelling. It taught me about the importance of communication and when I was a kid I was going through a lot, and in retrospect I know exactly what it was at the time. It was kind of like I didn’t feel right and writing was the way that I knew to sort of express what I was feeling that I wasn’t able to just articulate in a conversation. So that is why I started writing. My first poem was called “Who Am I?” Just trying to figure out where I fit in the middle of third grade. So that is why I started writing and that is pretty much why I continue to write over the last decade.

Smith: So, I am into more direct poetry, and I am not really into abstract poetry, and I felt like you were a confessional poet, do you believe yourself to be a confessional poet?

Ikpi: I think that there are confessional aspects of everything that I write because I write from a personal perspective. There is confessional poetry where somebody is just up there pouring out all this information about themselves. I don’t really think that I do that. For me confessional poetry is very personal to the person who is confessing, and what I hope to do as I said earlier is to communicate. So it is my personal story but I write for what I call the “me too” so that if I am able to put into words something that somebody else who may not be a writer is unable to put into words, it is the same shared experience, so I try to share that experience. So living with a mental illness and being able to write about the intricacies of depression is not like just, “oh I’m sad,” but what it means to have insomnia, and what your brain goes through when you can’t sleep and what your body goes through when you are depressed, and all these things that you are feeling, and being able to encompass that into words. I hope that somebody else can say “that is exactly what it feels like,” or “it is very similar to what it feels like when I go through that.” If you can identify great, if not I don’t really care, I actually really do care that people are able to find themselves in my work.

Smith: So I guess you kind of answered this, but I was wondering, why are your poems always so direct? What do you think is the advantage gained from being so direct and not being abstract like many other contemporary poets?

Ikpi: I think that... I am trying to say this delicately. I think that it gets to a point where... I am not a fan of abstract poetry myself. I feel like if I have to ask you what you mean then you could have said it clearer. I don’t believe in being purposely obtuse. I think it is pretentious. I think it has an, “I’m smarter than you,” type feel to it, which I think is ridiculous because you wrote it, you should know more about the subject matter than I do because it came from you. So abstract poetry, though it can be very beautiful, I don’t think it has the long range impact,

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or the life changing impact or the ability to draw people into your world by illuminating theirs and that is important to me. It may not be important to a lot of people but that is important to me in all my writing, be it poetry, prose, essay. I am trying to tell a story and I am trying to see if you connect with that story.

Smith: What is your writing process like? How do you begin a poem? Do you get a topic and go from there, or do you get inspiration from all around you?

Ikpi: It is a little bit of both. I don't really have a writing process. If I had a writing process I would probably write more. What usually happens is that there will be a line or a phrase or something that sticks in my head, and it will just be there and I'll just sit down a couple weeks later, a couple days later, that same day. I'll just sit down and kind of stare at my laptop and I'll write that phrase down. And the phrase can come from anywhere. It can come from me; it can be a song lyric. One of my favorite poems that I have ever written, well I can't say that but I liked it a lot. One of my favorite lines came from a TV Guide interview. I think that there is poetry everywhere, and poetic language everywhere, and so I try to find that. The line in the TV Guide article was from Mira Sorvino talking about how she broke a thermometer and then there was mercury spilling everywhere. And the image of mercury, this liquid solid spilling over surfaces, it kind of just hit me and I built a poem around that image. And a lot of times I will build a poem around a line or an image and end up taking the line out because it doesn't fit anymore; it doesn't make any sense to what I wrote so I discard it... I never discard anything I just sort of put it in another document. Maybe it will show up in an essay or maybe it will show up in something else that I am writing. But to answer your question, to me, poems are being written constantly in my head and then I'll sit down and in fifteen minutes whatever it is that is supposed to happen... not just poetry, my articles too are written in about fifteen, twenty minutes. I spend literally all day thinking about it and writing it in my head and all I need to do is just put it on paper and edit it, lose this line, lose this here, grab, take this here, grab out, stuff like that. But the bulk of it comes out really quickly because it was being built for quite a while.

Smith: Are the majority of your poems Spoken Word?

Ikpi: Like meant to be read?

Smith: Yes. How I found you was actually while going through some Def Poetry videos and I saw "Diallo" and I really loved that one, so I was just wondering what genre do the majority of your poems fit in? Is it spoken word?

Ikpi: I write poetry but I am also able to deliver poetry on stage in a way that gets people to listen to it, so I am a spoken word artist in that way, but I don't write for the stage. You know there are a lot of poets who write specifically to perform and you can tell because some of the stuff that they do is meant for a physical action or an audience situation type thing and I don't do that. I write poems and then I figure out how to perform those poems. I think that not every poet is a good performer and not every performer is a good writer there are a lot of people who are good at both, who write fantastic poems and have found ways to get on stage and deliver those poems. The poem is the message, the performance or the performer is the

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messenger. And recently I found, which is why I don't really perform as much; people have gone the way of the performance and left the writing to the side. Everything that I have written or performed holds up on paper you can read it and know exactly what I am talking about. In the performance there might be certain things, for instance, I have a poem that I have "Priscilla Simons" where there is a line that says "It was the weight, and the wait". And when you hear me say it, it sounds just like a lot of waiting. When you see it written down, it is weight, w-e-i-g-h-t, as in the heaviness, and wait, w-a-i-t, as in patience. And you don't get that when I perform it. But weight and wait still have its own meaning. So people say, "Oh my God that is a lot of waiting," but on paper it is two different words, but they still sort of envelope the same meaning, which is there is something happening here which is heavy and is blocking. So I definitely write for

Phone interference

Smith: I missed that last line.

Ikpi: I can't remember what I was saying...Oh I just reiterated that I write for the page and hope that I can perform it well.

Smith: What made you write the poem "Diallo?"

Ikpi: I wrote "Diallo"... "Diallo" is actually a much longer poem. I had to edit it for Def Poetry Jam. It's a much longer poem and I wrote it on the train. I was on a train from New York on my way to D.C. to visit my family, and while I was on the train the verdict of the police officers being acquitted of Amadou Diallo's death came through, and I just started writing. And the poem was finished by the time I hit Philly from New York. And basically it was me talking to Amadou Diallo's Mom about this country, like, this is what happens: they are going to say they're sorry, they're going to say they cried, they are going to say all these things, at the end of the day your son is dead. He was trying to get home. He was trying to do all these different things. He was trying to show that that he wasn't dangerous and they shot him anyway. My heart just really broke for his Mom. One of the things they do on Def Poetry is for some reason they change the name of all my poems. So the poem is not called "Diallo"; it is called "Untitled: To Kadiatou Diallo." Kadiatou Diallo is his Mom, and it is me talking to her and trying to apologize and trying to help her understand that this is America for black men. Because my heart just broke when I found out that they were not guilty given everything that happened and what bothers me...and it's been ten years since I wrote that poem, maybe longer, but what bothers me about that poem is that I have been able to do that poem and read that poem and change the name to Sean Bell and change the name to Trayvon Martin. I have been able to change the name so many times so I think the truth of what it is like to be young, black, and male in America, facing the police and being under suspicion is something that unfortunately, that comes up often.

Smith: Generally, how do you believe that your poetry is perceived? What are your greatest or harshest criticisms?

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Ikpi: That the work is too personal. That I am not political enough. That I don't talk about every issue that pops up. That is pretty much my harshest criticism. When I use to Slam I used to get, "Oh she only wins because she is little and cute" – which is ridiculous. But as I stopped slamming and just started going up the main critique is, "You should be more political, you should talk about women's issues, you should talk about racism, you should talk about race, you should talk about all these things," and I'm not a political poet. It is not who I am. I like to talk about people. I write a lot about people. I write a lot about people who live really difficult lives. I have poems about Bill Chiman, Amy Winehouse, Whitney Houston, Britney Spears, these women who have led this profane... and have been battling their own demons which is something that I personally identify with and other people identify with. That's what I want to write about. At this point I write about what I want to write about. I don't really care what people think I should be writing about. I write what I want to write. I write what I feel. I have done commercial writing where I get a call from someone and say, "Oh we need a poem for Soneir, or we need a poem for Kaizer," and I'll crank something out really quickly, but it is not anything that I am proud of. And that is the same that goes when someone says, "You need to write a poem about last Tuesday." It is going to come out just as dry and I'm not interested in that.

Smith: Well those were all the questions I had. Thank you so so much!

Ikpi: You're welcome, and let me know how it goes.

Smith: Thank you. Bye.

Ikpi: Alright, bye.

(End of Interview)

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