

Ravenna Motil-McGuire

“Redefining Perceptions of Africa through Art”

November 30, 2009

Kay Spiritual Life Center 7pm

Advised by Rachel Sullivan Robinson

General University Honors December 2009

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Please type (or print clearly):

Name: Ravenna Motil-McGuire

Capstone Title: "Redefining Perceptions of Africa through Art"

Honors: General University Honors December 2009

Advisor(s): Rachel Sullivan Robinson

Signature: Ravenna E. Motil-McGuire

Date: December 2, 2009

“Freedom Day”

Published Phem Magazine (2008)

Ravenna Motil-McGuire

Steve Biko’s silencing soiled the back of a van
Where he was beaten bloodless and brain dead
From Cape Town to Johannesburg
Rage unleashed upon his body because his soul was untouchable
His stolen life giving South Africans a reason to fight
Have we forgotten our martyrs?
Viola Liuzzo gunned down in Selma? A white mother from Michigan, she said the struggle was
everybody’s fight.
Our Malcolms, Martins, Emmett Tills?

In my country white faces are crippled by guilt or frustrated into ignorance.
It’s not about the history, it’s about today.
Good people who want equality,
who don’t want to live in white-washed neighborhoods
in cities where lack of melanin protects against AIDS, murder, and security checkpoints.
No one wants your guilt. But injustice didn’t end in 1967.

Cape Coloureds hiding in the rocks of Oudekral I see slaves escaping to Louisiana Marshes
Razor-wire surrounding Pretoria homes
money breeds fear everywhere.
Looking to South Africa
I see hope for the rest of the world
Pain so recent all the more passion makes.

We need some reconciliation here, we need truth.
We need our Mandela, we need to be our own.
The conversations that hurt the most are the only ones which help us heal.
If your wounds aren’t fresh enough grind up inner city schools, prisons, Langston’s deferred dreams,
Grind them up and pour it on like salt.

Divided we’re falling but we’re unaware cuz we don’t speak.
Thank you for coming to the table. Souls hungry for freedom must eat.

REMARKS:

INTRODUCTION:

Hi everyone, and welcome to “Redefining Perceptions of Africa through Art.”

My name is Ravenna Motil-McGuire, and I’m a senior in the School of International Service graduating in (less than) two weeks. During my time here I’ve been fortunate enough to travel to South Africa twice, once at the beginning of my education here and once this past summer as a leader of an Alternative Break. In the years between these two trips my understanding of Africa has changed radically, but the conversations I’ve had with others has not. For anyone who has any experience with South Africa, you’ll know that its cities look like San Francisco or L.A. or the Mediterranean, so it’s especially to return to questions about grass huts and giraffes. But in many places in the world there is one oversimplified and stereotypical rendering of Africa, and it’s neither empowering nor necessarily accurate. Each year that new maps are made closer to scale Africa gets bigger and Europe and the U.S. get smaller. Africa is the second largest continent in the world and contains over 50 countries. There is an immense amount of diversity on the continent, and innumerable lessons the rest of the world can benefit from valuing— from music and poetry to innovative technology and health initiatives. But first we need to respect the continent enough to listen.

My understanding of Africa has been most shaped by listening to Africans, which is what we’re seeking to do tonight—to facilitate the opportunity to talk about uncomfortable topics with individuals who have insight from both sides. While I’m hesitant to create an “us and them” dichotomy, the reality is that it already exists and in order for us to move past it we must first take ownership of our own role within it.

The artists are here because they’re just as committed to this topic as I am. Please be honest, and if you have a question or comment you don’t feel comfortable asking out loud write it down on a piece of paper in the lobby and hand it to one of the people at the tables, who will give it to me.

This event would not be possible without the overwhelming support of our cosponsors. Please bare with me as the list is long, but every one of these organizations has contributed something critical to this event. Much thanks to Alpha Phi Omega, Africa Council, African Students Organization, AU Baptists, AU Burma, AU Club Council, AU Episcopalians, AU Model UN, AU NAACP, Community Action and Social Justice Coalition, Community Service Center, EcoSense, Graduate Leadership Council, Honors Program, International Communication Student Forum, Office of the Dean of Students, Office of Multicultural Affairs, On a Sensual Note, Phi Mu, Project Nur, Queers and Allies, Residence Hall Association, Student Advocates for Native Communities, Students for African Studies, Student Peace Alliance, Students for Sensible Drug Policy, Tau Kappa Epsilon, US Foreign Policy Association, WASSA, Washington Peace Center, Women’s Initiative, Yoga and Movement, and Zed’s Ethiopian Cuisine.

We have an incredible line-up of talented musicians and poets tonight, and for the first hour and a half we’ll enjoy performances by Galileo, Femi the Dri Fish, Bassef Ikpi, and Mahala. Afterwards we’ll have a

panel featuring the artists as panelists where you'll have the opportunity to ask questions and engage the artists in discussion on perceptions of Africa. Afterward I hope you'll join us for a reception with Ethiopian appetizers and lots of Injera. Thank you so much for coming.

FEMI INTRO:

So, we'll open tonight's performances with the incredible energy and insight of Femi the Dri Fish. The Dri Fish was born in London and raised in Nigeria, and has been a fixture in the poetry world, based out of Baltimore, for quite some time. He's performed across the country both alone and with his poetic partner Native Son, together forming "the 5th L." Femi teases out some really interesting interpretations of life through comedy, poetry, spoken word, and really uncomfortable questions. From experience I can say that responding to his facebook statuses have gotten me in some great arguments.

In addition to poetry Femi does critical work with Violence Prevention in the University of Maryland Hospital Trauma Ward. You can find more information about that in the program for tonight's event. Please join me in welcoming the ever-brilliant, ever-entertaining, ever-shocking artistry that is Femi the Dri Fish.

GALILEO INTRO:

Thanks Femi. Be sure to download his work—the link is listed in the program. Follow him online through Facebook or his web site—he hosts a number of poetry events in Baltimore which feature some really talented artists.

Our next artist for tonight is Galileo. We're lucky to get him now as he's heading back to Accra for the holidays in just a few weeks. In the year and a half that I've known Leonard, I've been consistently blown away by his brilliance. He infuses a deep love for tradition and Africa and hip hop into everything he does, and his performances are more of a journey than a passive listening experience. Tonight he's playing with an incredible set of locally based musicians—Galileo.

BASSEY INTRO:

Galileo has been making moves, please be sure to follow him online.

I'm sure I'm not the only one in this room who is incredibly excited to see our next artist, Bassey Ikpi. Bassey has created a well-deserved name for herself throughout the world as a dynamic poet. She's performed with Grammy Award Winning artists and was recently flown to Johannesburg to feature at Joburg Arts Live. Bassey embodies poetry in her words and movement, and we are incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to hear her tonight. Please join me in welcoming Bassey Ikpi.

MAHALA INTRO:

That was an experience. Thank you Bassey!

Now is our final performance, Mahala. Tonight Mahala includes Mongezi Ntaka and Kuku. This duo represents an incredible amount of talent—Mongezi was Lucky Dube's lead guitarist from the age of 16

and Kuku is a wonderful Afro-soul musician in his own right. Together they create beautiful, haunting, energizing music. Please welcome Mahala to the stage.

PANEL INTRO:

Thank you Mahala. Thank you to all of our artists. I'm going to now ask the artists to join us on the panel.

Often in the United States we create a dichotomy between arts and academia, assuming that artists exist only to entertain and academics exist only to teach. But the most impactful learning occurs where there is enjoyment, and art often has a deeper message. In the program I spoke of griots, West African storytellers present in Mali and throughout western and northern Africa, who travel throughout communities observing and gathering stories which they then relate through music and poetry. Griots are respected as educators and culture-bearers. Tonight we respect our performers as griots, as performers and teachers.

Thank you to everyone who wrote down words which they associated with Africa. Your honesty is critical to giving this conversation meaning. We've typed up the words in order to start the conversation. If some of the words seem silly or unbelievable, please remember that ignorance refers to a lack of knowledge and it is far better to fill this space with real, human information and experience rather than stereotypes and misinformation. I'm going to start the panel off by asking the artists to introduce themselves further, in terms of any thoughts on this topic. What does Africa mean to you? After initial thoughts we'll open up the panel to the audience, for questions or points of discussion.

WORDS:

The following words were compiled from those listed anonymously by the audience members during the performances in response to the question “What words come to mind when you think of Africa?” These words were then projected on a screen next to the panelists and used as a starting point for the panel discussion. Capitalization indicates that a word was written more than once.

Lion King, acacia trees, good music, dance, Habib Koite, BEAUTIFUL, samba, giraffes, origin of step, black people, sunsets, Egypt, motherland, ancient, South Asians, home, CULTURE, mother, lions, dynamic, strong women, grasslands, thieves, AIDS, tragic, Kaffir Boy, extreme POVERTY, informal settlements, slums, overpopulated, GENOCIDE, old cultures and traditions, Darfur, homogenous, famine, FAMILY, stolen resources, debt, Rwanda, Madiba, research, hospitality, DEVELOPMENT, drums, roots, joy of life, heritage, strength, history, origin of man, power, art, children, wealth, colonization, exploitation, potential

The anonymity of this process allowed the audience members to be as honest as possible in articulating their perceptions of Africa. Many of the words were in keeping with what I expected, and what motivated me to hold this event—words which either exocitized or stereotyped the continent. I was pleased to also see so many unexpected words, indicating that there is already in some spaces a more nuanced understanding of Africa.

SUMMARY & FEEDBACK:

My capstone was developed in response to two disturbing trends which I have found to be present in academic and social discourse around Africa: the global north's willingness to oversimplify and stereotype Africa and the presence within the United States of a false dichotomy between art and academia. In conjunction with World AIDS Day, which often targets Africa's pandemic, I brought five African artists, Ethiopian food, and Kenyan artwork to campus to celebrate the continent's creativity. The line-up included Bassey Ikpi, Femi Lawal, Mongezi Ntaka, Abdulzaltar Kuku, and Leonard Kessie. While participants were coming into the event I asked that they anonymously write down words which they associated with Africa. Following brief performances by all of the artists the performers were invited to sit on a panel which engaged the audience in discussing perceptions of Africa and how they can be enriched. This discussion was prompted using the words people had written down, which were typed up and projected on a large screen.

Attendance at the event peaked at around 115 people, with around 50 individuals who came and left throughout the night and a steady audience of 75 people through the event's end. Participants included AU students and faculty, a large group of students from Howard University, and some members of the general public. I gauged the success of this event on a handful of indicators outside of attendance:

- That I was able to make several points which, as I finish my undergraduate career, I felt were critical to share.
 - Speaking of Africa in oversimplified or stereotypical terms diminishes our ability to respect the continent, and that disrespect influences policy.
 - Africa possesses a number of intellectual resources, from art to technology to health initiatives, which the world would benefit from valuing.
 - AIDS is not confined to Africa and the United States has much to learn from African models in terms of HIV prevention.
 - We should incorporate art into academia and respect artists as educators.
- That the audience felt comfortable in engaging the panelists.
 - This event rested on the willingness of the audience to be open in their questions and comments. Once we'd gone 30 minutes over time I had to stop taking questions in order to move the event to the reception portion. Obviously there was a lot of openness and excitement to continue this conversation, some of which got directed downstairs where the conversations continued. I'd argue that the reason the audience felt so comfortable with the panelists is because the panelists had already made themselves vulnerable to the audience through their performances, and had established a rapport and a trust that would not have been established otherwise.
- That the artists felt satisfied with the event.
 - The artists are most sensitive to the energy of an event, and they were all very happy with how the event progressed.

- That the artists and cosponsors felt satisfied with the event.
 - Artists are most sensitive to the energy of an event. Since the artists are all Africans and my intention was to showcase African voices, their feedback was especially important. All of the artists thanked me for having participated in the event, and Kuku made me an honorary Nigerian.
 - A member of the African Students' Organization said that the event made her feel proud of her heritage. Project Nur said that they were honored to have been a part. Several other organizations wrote me praising the event and the ways in which it encouraged dialogue. Pledge to Protect (supporting anti-genocide legislation) solicited over 40 pledges. Overall there was a tremendous amount of positive feedback.

I'm grateful that this capstone allowed me the opportunity to develop my own ideas as an African studies major, HIV activist, poet, and organizer, and the ways in which all of these identities have changed and changed me throughout my undergraduate experience. This event brought together all of the passions and knowledge I've cultivated while at American University, and is exactly the legacy which I would like to leave behind at the institution which has been so integral in my own formation.

Thank you,
Ravenna