The Blacker The Berry is a collage inspired by the phrase " The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" by Wallace Thurman. This collage celebrates Black Pride and resilience.

Daylen Conserve


"GET
JIM
Age 8
JOHN
Age 13

Disney, Orientalism, and African Pride: Becoming Conscious of African Identity

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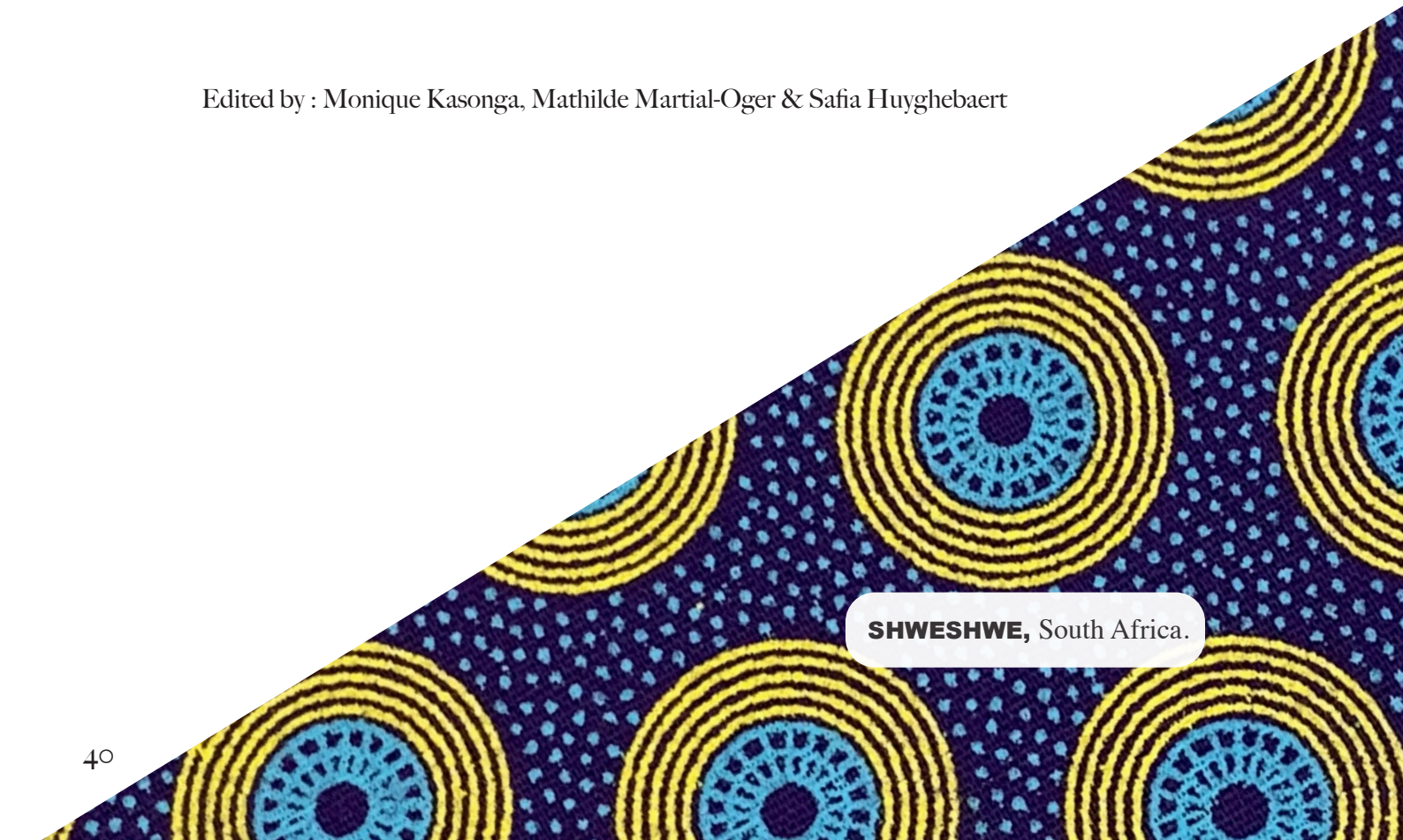

SHWESHWE, South Africa.

"*In Africa, dinner theater is a lion gnawing on a gazelle carcass in front of a bus load of horrified tourists*" (Eells et al., 2014).

Years ago, my sisters and I were watching the Disney Channel's Jessie, a supposedly family-friendly comedy about a small-town Southern girl–the titular Jessie– who moves to New York City to work as a nanny for a wealthy family. In this episode, "There Goes the Bride," Jessie is about to get married to her long-term boyfriend–until he receives a job offer and decides to move to Africa (no specific country–simply "Africa.") Jessie, whose dream is to be a big-time Hollywood star, is forced to break up with him, because according to Disney, the only things in Africa are "ostrich burgers," "heat strokes," and "huge mosquitoes" (Eells et al., 2014). At this specific line my mother made us pause the show. "Africa's not like that," she said. "We have cities and highways. And there are over 50 countries in Africa. It's not just a big safari with lions and cheetahs." Until that moment, it had never previously occurred to me that my mother was African. I had always known of her African identity in a peripheral sense: I knew she had grown up in Sierra Leone; I knew my middle name, Maagenda, was in honour of my Sierra Leonean great-grandmother; I knew my skin–as pale as it was–was darker than that of my classmates, and my hair, as much as I straightened it, would curl and frizz in the humidity. I knew the taste of perfectly ripe mangoes, which I didn't realize was unusual until I went to my white friend's house and had to politely eat a mango, so green and sour, it was practically inedible. At the same time, I did not know what it meant to be African. My sisters and I were the only kids of African heritage in our elementary school, and possibly also in our very traditional, very upper-class, and very white neighborhood; as a result, we were, in some sense, denied our culture and our connection to our African and Mende roots.

Growing up in that environment, Africa was not seen as a continent but as a distant safari destination—an exotic place where my friends imagined "lots of cool animals," while their parents described it as "underdeveloped" and home to "millions

of starving children." The media I consumed in my childhood only validated the plot of Jessie: the UNICEF ads of skin-and-bone African children who have to walk miles to get clean water, the digital camera pictures of my friends in jeeps with safari hats pointing excitedly at elephants and hippos. I accepted these "facts" about Africa at face value simply because I was aware of no others. I only knew what I was told, and the media I consumed told me that Africa, and by extension, Africans, were to be pitied.

Bonsu (2009) writes of the media's portrayal of Africans as "primitive enough to merit exclusion from popular culture, except as objectified entertainment that reinforce[s] stereotypical African inferiority." Jessie, a show with a target demographic of American pre-teens, capitalizes on this pattern for shock value and cheap humour, blissfully unaware– or, perhaps, fully aware–of the impression of Africa being shaped in the developing minds of its audience. Jessie, however, is just one example of the media that informed my childhood understanding of Africa, or lack thereof. Western media willfully plays into the colonial narrative of the "savage" African, the "other." According to Luig and von Oppen (1997, pp. 23-31), Africa has historically been painted by its colonizers as "a landscape of extreme ugliness, of discomfort, loneliness, want, and poverty," whilst simultaneously being romanticized as a "wild… opaque, dark, and dangerous" land, populated by "fabulous men and beasts"–otherwise known as "dark Africa." It was my mother, turning off the television and declaring herself to be African, declaring Africa something to be proud of, that first made me question the idea of Africa I had internalized since birth. Africa was no longer so foreign and alien to me: Africa was present in my home. Africa was my mother. Africa was part of me.

After becoming cognizant of my own African identity, I began trying to reframe the very Eurocentric and disturbingly inaccurate perception of Africa fed to me since birth. I had never once questioned the way my peers and the media around me consistently and shamelessly generalize a continent that "constitutes a kaleidoscope of diversity" – a continent

comprised of 54 countries, thousands of ethnic groups and languages, and countless and varied cultures, traditions, and experiences (Schraeder, 2020, pp. 2-3). I had grown up complicit in that generalization. I never truly understood the country my mother came from—the land of my ancestors—until what seemed like a simple moment of watching TV with my family, followed by our conversation, pushed me to rethink everything I thought I knew.

The foundation of my knowledge about Africa comes from my mother. She proudly displayed Mende Sowei masks in our home, braided my hair into cornrows, and fried plantain on the stove. She made us jollof rice and told me stories about her childhood in Sierra Leone—stories that I eventually came to understand in a new way. My mother told us about her heritage with pride. She recalled her father, who had endless degrees and had traveled across the world, speaking flawless English, Mende, and Krio. She told me about her step-grandfather, Siaka Stevens, the President of Sierra Leone, and how he would let her sit on his lap as he rode in his limousine through the streets of Freetown. At the same time, she spoke of the lasting trauma and violence in Sierra Leone, from colonization to the civil war it fueled—how Charles Taylor's Revolutionary United Front burned down my grandfather's house and how he had to push his elderly mother in a wheelbarrow from our rural hometown of Njala to safety in Bo.

My mother humanized Africa for me. She contrasted what I had learned from the media–a fantastical, one-dimensional mirage–with the truth of what Africa was, at least to her: the beauty of Beach No.2, the bustling markets of Freetown, the brilliant, highly-educated Africans working in politics and diplomacy who had raised her, alongside the blood and brutality of the Sierra Leonean Civil War, the lack of adequate healthcare facilities and educational institutions, and the struggling economy widely exploited by international superpowers.

My knowledge of Africa is still limited in many ways. It revolves mainly around the country of my ancestors, Sierra Leone, and the few Krio words and Mende traditions my mother still

remembers decades after immigrating to Canada. Thus, my notion of Africa and African identity is intrinsically personal and pertinent to my own experience; I imagine scholars, or even other Africans would have very different perceptions of African history, society, peoplehood, and of Africa itself.

As restricted as my knowledge of Africa is, I have been conscious of my African heritage since that highly-condescending sitcom comment when I was 10 or 11. I take pride in my African heritage.A gold pendant, in the shape of the continent – with my middle name engraved on it – always sits around my neck. At the same time, I am conscious of my removal from Africa, the fact that, as open as I may be to learning, my perception of Africa was molded in my formative years by the deeply Orientalist media and discourse that surrounds the majority of those who grow up within North America, and who lack meaningful exposure to the true wealth, diversity, and beauty of Africa.

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