



Reflections

(Re)connections, Relationships, and Spiritual Expressions: *Gleanings from a Transatlantic Writing Project*

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Introduction

My task here today is simple; it is reflecting on the project as an active, grateful participant. I would like to start with a short story. When I told my 90-year-old retired dad that I was going to Jamaica (August 2024) to participate in an academic writing workshop, he wondered why? I had successfully completed my PhD a few years ago, he said, and wondered what further academic writing skills I would need. I told him this was serious business and I read out the title of the project to him: “Religion, Faith, and Development in Ghana and Jamaica: Connecting Transatlantic Theological Voices and Enhancing Leadership through Academic Writing Workshops” (what we more manageably refer to as the ‘Transatlantic Writing Project,’ or TWP). He said it certainly sounded very serious.

“How Are the People There?”

But then, his concern turned to the people. On the third day of my time in Jamaica for the in-person workshop, on one of my dad’s repeated calls to me, he asked an unusual question that changed everything. “How are the people there?” he asked. “Which people?” I asked back, puzzled about whether he might mean other participants, leaders, our hosts, or what. “The Jamaicans,” he answered. “How are they?”

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I stumbled over a response, because his questions sounded strange to me. What did this have to do with me, or with my family? We are Nigerians, and my dad had never mentioned anything about Jamaica. Why would he? What would we have to do with one another? As I had mentioned to the project leaders, while I was very interested and supportive of the transatlantic focus of the project, it did not resonate personally for me. And then my dad's life-changing words: "Tell them sorry." My dad knew what I had not taken the time to learn: that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ibibios were among the over 15% of trafficked Nigerians sent to Jamaica.² My dad is Ibibio, an ethnic group found in Akwa Ibom State, south-south region of Nigeria. In an instant, everything changed for me. I was not just a tourist or conference participant; I was visiting the home of my ancestors. And while I had come by air as a free person, they had travelled by ships, involuntarily, across the Atlantic. My dad saw beyond the academic aspirations of this project to the potential for transatlantic reconnection, relationships, repair, and spiritual expressions. It was sobering, a day later, to observe the Ibibio presence recorded on the informational graphics at Seville Great House.

I found gains that the project organizers could not have fully anticipated; what we might refer to as the 'serendipitous moments' of academic endeavour. And that is what my reflection is about: (re)connections, relationships, and spiritual expressions; reflecting on what this project has come to mean to me, and might I add, other participants as well, though I am focusing on my experience.

Make no mistake: the project has been intense — regular team presentation sessions, meetings with mentors, receiving peer reviews, being reassigned new peer reviewers and having a commitment to being what Professor Emerita and project senior mentor Susan Felch termed "the writer who actually writes!" And there have been encouraging progress reports from many. I myself have submitted a book chapter for review and am currently exploring avenues for the publication of my monograph, a revision of my PhD thesis, and am using the tools I have gained to begin leading writing workshops for clergy-scholars in Nigeria and more widely across West Africa. I know other colleagues who are at a similar publishing stage. But I think this personal reflection is necessary because as we have come to know, the process of any academic endeavour is as important as the product. In fact, research has shown that the process authenticates the output and forms part of the call to accountability.³

² See G. Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–21.

³ See Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 3rd edition (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 54.

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Transatlantic and Academic (Re)Connections

First, let me talk about connections. My area of research is primarily disability studies, with an added focus on gender, women, and healing, specifically related to HIV and associated issues. Disability studies is still quite an isolated terrain. It is not uncommon for me to attend a conference and to be the only person or just one of a few speaking on disability. So, imagine my delight to meet an amazing Jamaican participant and colleague in this project who is also engaged in disability studies. Louise has become a friend and sister; we are kindred spirits. Louise's research examines the diasporic perceptions of disability as one living and studying in the United States. Louise is writing on the perceptions of diasporic Christian African Caribbean Parents towards Autism and parental stress. My work has been primarily based on the Christian woman in south-south Nigeria, exploring how faith enables or does not enable the engagement and struggle with sociological, psychological, stigmatic, and spiritual challenges related to disability and gender.

When Louise and I communicated, we were intrigued about how transatlantic understandings and expressions of faith inform the way that people affected and impacted by disability respond to life. We had other things in common: we are both clergywomen married to clergymen. We have both lived in our homes of birth and are now diasporic Christians managing the complexities of living actively in both worlds; I in the UK; she in the US. For both of us, disability research and writing are not just academic pursuits but a lifetime of passion and commitment to disability response by all agents of society. Our work is research advocacy with the intent to produce change. This is much like the works of the mentors of this project who advocate that our scholarship must have transformative impact in our societies.

Louise and I are both of African descent and to us, our indigenous systems, rituals, and culture cannot be removed from who we are, who we are becoming, and what we are doing as scholars. We believe that they are complimentary and we desire to see the similarities and/or differences between African and Caribbean spiritualities with a particular focus on disability inclusion or exclusion. Would it be possible to uncover or (re)discover positive indigenous responses to disability that might have been lost through colonial influence, distance, and time? You will not be surprised to know that during our time in Jamaica, we visited the Bookshop of the University of West Indies (Mona Campus) and got valuable books on Caribbean spiritualities. Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye has noted something many of us may already know: that women do great things when they work together and support one another.⁴

⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 29.

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I do hope Louise and I will go on to do great things together, contributing to disability discourse from transatlantic, African-Caribbean perspectives; and we will have this unique project to thank for that.

Relationships

In the life of the project, we have built new relationships and strengthened existing ones. I have just mentioned my new friendship and academic collaboration with Louise. But beyond the attention to research and writing, we have enjoyed sharing of our lives with one another. We have workshop pictures to show what fun we have had. Workshop hosts and hostesses in both Ghana and Jamaica generously gave of themselves, going above and beyond, and in so doing offered us a model of hospitality that is based on Christ-like friendship. Jesus would say to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants . . . I call you friends” (John 15:15, NIV). John Swinton has popularized the idea of radical friendship that Jesus modelled with the disciples — the kind that broke the glass ceiling of hierarchies, differences, and distinctions and offered so much without expecting anything in return but friendship.⁵

We came together as women and men, mentors and mentees, retired professors and early career academics, younger and older in age, clergy and lay people, Black and White and other colours in between, and from a number of different communities and contexts. But over meals around a table, early morning coffees, dancing at Jamaican Independence Village, soaking, swimming, or learning to swim on an outing at Dunn’s River Falls, we built relationships that were healing and invigorating. And, in between the conversations and sharing, there was the soft, patient, kind, and persistent challenge to write — to be “the writer that writes,” to see writing as a calling, as a vocation, a spiritual response, a bold and vulnerable step of activism, and the giving of ourselves to the world.

Spiritual Expressions

And this brings me to the last point of my reflection: the surprising aspect of a faith-based academic writing endeavour that was actually faith-focused, giving space to our shared, though diverse, Christian faith. Questions that hovered over us include things like, *in what ways or to what extent does our Christian faith propel us to write? How is writing integral to our call as people of faith? How do we use writing as an act of ‘proclamation,’ of offering information, and signposting readers to existential issues?* When we gathered at Seville Great House Heritage Park (St Ann, Jamaica), we were led through a ritual of

⁵ John Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 44–45.

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remembrance using the liturgy reconnecting the living-death of our ancestors with the living-living of the present. The organizers of the project adapted the “Tears in a Bottle Liturgy for Trauma Transformation” originally written by my good friend, Reverend Nicole Ashwood.⁶ We made it our own and expressed our responses in ways unique to us — in songs, in tears, in silence, in movement, and by symbolically placing our pens on the ‘African Tomb’ as an act of commitment to telling the stories of our ancestors. Together, we formed a bond that holds us accountable to this gift, this motivation, this encouragement, this mentoring, to *write*.

Where to Next? Writing, Relationships, and Reconciliation

So, what do we do with the knowledge that this transatlantic collaboration has unearthed? Perhaps the first thing is to pay attention to our understanding of the task and vocation of writing. In a very spiritual sense, we owned the art of writing and identified and claimed it as being as much of a religious or spiritual call as an academic or professional one. The pen is transformative. The Reformed tradition, of which I am a part, notes that all of life is a worship space. This writing project was, and remains, a worship space and calls us to transform our lives and those of our readers with our writing.

And the second thing: in the midst of all of these connections, relationships, and spirituality, we formed and experienced something bigger than ourselves and bigger than our expectations. In coming together in community in all our glorious diversities and shared Christian faith, gathering in these places of historic and ongoing pain and trauma, we experienced a taste of healing and reconciliation — and found ancestors and family — and glimpsed the power of writing and community to open the doors to such transformation. It is something that calls me to commit to writing, to publishing, to making a difference with my voice and the voices of those whom I represent.

On my return from Jamaica, I called my dad and thanked him for challenging me to see beyond the ‘letters’ of this project and to appreciate its wider spirit and life.⁷ And I thank the organizers, the project leaders, mentors, the funders and collaborating institutions for the privilege of being part of this unique project. And I thank you for listening, and now for reading; affirming that indeed, words matter.

⁶ *Editorial Note:* See “Tears in a Bottle Liturgy: Jamaica,” pp. 129–134 in this issue.

⁷ A reference to the concept of the ‘letter of the law versus the spirit of the law,’ from Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6, NIV).