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21W.742 Writing About Race
Essay 2: Final Portfolio Submission

Sticks and Stones

Growing up in a house ruled by my occasionally overbearing father, there were two words that my sister and I were absolutely forbidden to say – *jungle* and *monkey*. I can't remember the exact circumstances as to why the rule first appeared. But I can vaguely recall my older sister and me singing and dancing around the house to a song that used those two words profusely, and I believe it was this excessiveness that brought up the issue in the first place.

At first, the rule sounds really bizarre. Being young children in elementary and middle school, my sister and I knew far more universally offensive words. Yet with all the swear words and derogatory adjectives we had stored in our naïve brains, *jungle* and *monkey* became the most shocking and unforgivable words to be spoken in our household.

Instead, our father taught us to say that it is not a jungle but a "rain-forest" and my sister and I soon learnt to avoid anything to do with primates in general. Just the fury that my father would show at the mention of any one of those words was frightening. If he was watching the news and a news anchor happen to mention the word *jungle* he would mutter under his breath. My sister and I learnt to never to use those words in his presence.

When I was a young child of about five, the source of his anger was something I couldn't fathom. It seemed irrational. I was willing to concede that a jungle was a rain-forest but a monkey was a *monkey*. What had a monkey ever done to him? A monkey couldn't help being called a monkey. That was his name.

In secret, my sister and I defiantly joked referring to these words as the "J-word" and the "M-word". "Did you see that *M-word* in the *J-word*?" my sister would ask me whispering the forbidden terms. "D'you mean that *M-word*, over there? In the *J-word*? " I would reply laughing hysterically at the absurdity of the situation. To us, the words were simply words.

My father, on the other hand, it seems had put weight in all words, especially in his daughters names. The apparently innocent arrangement of the letters and the resonance of the name when pronounced has a self-encoded message that is non-European to the western eye and ear. My name has always given my background away.

Over the years, I have attempted to master the skill of group blending and have become quite skilled at the art of becoming invisible in an informal gathering of people. But as superman has his kryptonite, I have a name tag or a formal introduction to remove the cloak of my obscurity. And I think that was my father's sole intent when he named my sister and me.

It was not as though he had no other choices or options. Many Ghanaians have "Christian" names. For example, my mother's name is Winifred and my father's mother's name is Julie. I have an Uncle named Ben and another one named Felix. In essence a Christian name is one given by Ghanaian parents that is not in any way traditional. Most of the time these names tend to be frumpy English names, like Hortense, Mildred, Hubert, or something else that defies the person's distinct African features.

Typically these Christian-named Ghanaians use their names at places such as school or work. At home or in the village, they are called by their African middle names. It is a simple transition that most pay no heed to. My father always calls my mother using her African name- Ama. At work or in public my mother easily responds to Winifred. The two interchangeable names are worlds apart yet both work effectively when trying to get her attention. Surely if placed in that situation, I would occasionally forget to answer to one.

However, my father refused to give either of his daughters Christian names. From the beginning to end, our names are purely traditional and highly difficult for non-Ghanaians to pronounce. In almost outright defiance of a common practice, my father chose to mark us eternally, and forever link us culturally by our names.

I'm sure he first thought of it as a seemingly small gesture, but the ramifications of his decisions are ones that my sister and I live with every day.

My father's actions often remind me of that scene in the television version of Alex Haley's "*Roots*". The slave Kunta Kinte is being whipped for refusing to use his new name. In the scene the harsh slave master, poised with an unyielding whip in his hand, says to Kunta, "Toby, what is your name?" The screen pans to a view of Kunta's back. The whip marks are bleeding, etched in his back, sweat drips from his forehead and he replies, "Kunta… Kunta Kinte," as he falls to the ground.

I remember first watching the movie when I was ten, and thinking he should just say Toby, save himself from all the agony. It was just a name, a word so people could identify him. A name was just a word. It was only when I began to enter my adolescence did I understand the source of my father's unconventional behavior and see the value of words for what they truly are.

When I first started school in America, it was almost as if I had flown in on a magic carpet. I showed up to a fifth grade class in the middle of March, during the middle of the week, seemingly from nowhere. Of course, I was asked my name, and it sparked a curiosity in the other children. I had to tell them that it was from Ghana. The name was African. That was when the questions came rolling in. One student actually asked me, if I had ever been to the jungle! The Jungle? I had never been camping, let alone to a jungle. But to the student it seemed to be an obvious connection. I was African, wasn't the jungle in Africa?

I had to tell him no, and I could see the unexpected disappointment in his face. I slowly began to understand my father's aversion to the *J-word*. The question became more than about seeing a jungle. In some way the question had implied that I had lived in a jungle.

The jungle is a wild place, untamed. According the dictionary, it is characterized by "ruthless struggle for survival." People who live in the jungle are primitive. In essence, the jungle is the opposite of civilization. There is no order. What lives in a Jungle? A monkey. Where is the Jungle? Most people would say in Africa. I soon came to realize that my father had lived with these stereotypes and derogatory concepts as an African in Western society.

One would think if he had known that he would be raising his daughters in a world filled surrounded with negative stereotypes toward Africans, he would have chosen to give them Christian names. But he didn't, for the same reason I have never thought of changing my name, the word used to identify me.

It was never, ever about jungles and monkeys. The connotations surrounding the words were what haunted my father. It was the use of the words and the uncanny ability of these words to turn into weapons as deadly as sticks and stones. Language is perhaps the one single entity that has both the capacity to both unite and divide people. The words that make up a language commonly reflect the views and perceptions of that community.

Perhaps the most powerful words are the names that we give ourselves. Because in these names, in these words which we call ourselves, is a reflection of individual spirit, history, and pride. When talking about race and ethnicities the question of what to call different groups is always raised. For me, the term *Native American* reminds me of who really was here in America first. The term *Indian* reminds me of the misnomer and the numerous other injustices caused by European conquest. Either way, a meaning is conveyed in these names. Are they Indian? Or are they Native American? The correct answer is always what people choose to call themselves.

Whether it is black, African, or African-American, the combination of seemingly random letters that I can use to call myself carries a certain weight that cannot be avoided. Within a majority white crowd, I am black. When I check off the census, I am African American. And when I speak my name I am African.

What my father understood and what I have now come to understand is that the words we choose for ourselves and others are closely linked to our convictions. Though my father never explicitly said so, by prohibiting my sister and me to say two words, he taught us to refute the stereotypes we would soon face about being Africans. Conversely, by giving us African names instead of Christian names, he also taught us to confront such labels as proud Ghanaians in the Western world.