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Halfies, Half-Written Letters, and One-Eyed Gods: Connecting the Dots of Communicative Cultures

Gregory Stephens
University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez
Mayagüez, Puerto Rico
gregory.stephens@upr.edu

ABSTRACT

This essay distills the theory of communicative cultures as a tool for cultural analysis. Nadine Gordimer's line about the difficulties of returning to "half-written letters" is used to frame anthropology's critique of "bounded culture" or "container cultures," predominat in Cultural Studies. Anthropologists Lila Abu-Lughod and Kirin Narayan have described "halfies" as in-between peoples who can help us understand fluid, processual cultures as normative. Building on this stance, and the work of rhetorical genre scholars, Stephens defines communicative cultures as "a set of shared commitments expressed through cultural means." This approach to cultural analysis, in which literature is viewed as an "ethnographic resource," is illustrated through an analysis of Jamaican writer Olive Senior's story "Country of the One Eye God." The repeating patterns in Jamaican culture which this approach reveals, it is suggested, point to the wider utility of communicative cultures as an analytical concept.

Keywords: Communicative; cultural analysis; ethnography; repeating patterns; generations; structure of feeling; literature as ethnographic resource

INTRODUCTION

This essay is adapted from a book project which uses a theory of communicative cultures to model cultural analysis and interdisciplinary writing. Addressing readers at the interstices between popular culture and pedagogy, I call again on Ken Hyland's concept of "stance and engagement." The notion of a stance taken to facilitate a certain interactive mode helps explain my movement between scholarship and creative writing. My particular "disciplined interdisciplinarity" (Bazerman) aims to engage readers willing to imagine a cross-fertilization between theory and personal or literary narrative. My larger aims here include an argument for an ethnographic variant of cultural analysis and a demonstration of the value of creative writing pedagogies. I apply an ethnographic approach to both cultural analysis and creative writing, distilling my creative writing pedagogy as *culture shapes character*, for example.

My sense of disenchantment with most cultural studies is not uncommon. In fact, Stuart Hall came to have profound misgivings about his baby. Having already mapped this terrain (Stephens, "Beyond the Romance"), I will reference more narrowly anthropology's "Against Culture" or "Beyond Culture" turn (Abu-Lughod; Herbert; Fox & King), which critiques the celebratory or oppositional identity politics that have come to dominate cultural studies. Engaging this body of scholarship has led me to adapt "halfies" as a pivotal concept for cultural analysis, and the writing/ teaching of literary prose. Lila Abu-Lughod, a Palestinian-American anthropologist, introduced this idea in 1991 as a way of positing "in-between people" as a sort of antidote to static concepts of culture. The concept has been taken up by several anthropologists, notably Kirin Narayan, whose father was Indian, and whose mother was born to German and American parents. Nayaran has lived and worked in India and Australia as well as in the USA. The interlayering of her various personal and professional roles and identities is a profound challenge to one-size-fits-all categories, including nationality, race, class, and gender. This multi-centeredness also applies to her diverse writerly approaches, which range from scholarship to fiction to literary nonfiction and all points in between.

Nayaran's distillation of what being a halfie or "mixie" means in practice--and her argument that this phenomenon is far more pervasive than many are able or willing to acknowledge--has broad implications. If understood in depth, this reconsideration of what one might call a "halfie lifeworld" constitutes something of a "Samson job" on identity politics. Serge Gruzinski, a specialist of Latin American history, states clearly the implications of learning to see the pervasiveness of the halfie/mixie phenomena. In *The Mestizo Mind*, he writes:

> Either we totally fail to see the mestizo phenomena that occurred or, once they become dominant and irrefutable, they are hastily described as "contamination" or interference. … [Yet] the groups and individuals who act as go-betweens…have played a key role in history [while providing the] energy in new modes of thinking. (*Mestizo Mind*, 14; 23)

I enter this domain via a story by Nadine Gordimer. A bit of signposting is in order. My "half-written letters" about communicative cultures are incomplete, for reasons both intentional and unavoidable. Cultural analysis that accounts for radical fluidity must necessarily be incomplete, I argue. So, the "connect the dots" approach I demonstrate cannot or should not completely *finish the picture*. A writer can suggest a direction, but completion of interpretation should be left to readers. Both Gordimer's story and Olive Senior's "Country of the One Eye God" illustrate the necessarily unfinished and processual nature of cultural analysis.

The fictions of Gordimer and Senior help illustrate a key distinction regarding communicative cultures, which I define as *shared commitments expressed through cultural means*. Unlike the theories of discourse communities, or communities of practice, communicative cultures are outward directed. They invite some level of participation by listeners, readers, or observers who do not necessarily share the objectives of the original culture. This is true of literature and music associated with the apartheid era in South Africa (usually oppositional), and with musical expressions in Jamaica, such as reggae, which express a shared commitment

to racial equality, and decolonization. The stories are read and the music is listened to by a mixed public, some of whom simply enjoy the music, or who fasten upon one element of a story, or one theme in a song, without "buying into" the underlying equal rights. It is this transgressive, open-ended, fluid, and processual nature of communicative cultures that I hope to help visualize.

ANOTHER HALF-WRITTEN LETTER

In Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World*, the young widow Liz, asked to provide a dangerous service for black nationalists in South Africa, remarks, "I can never go back to a half-written letter; the tone, when you take it up again, doesn't match" (Gordimer 73).

My efforts to elaborate a type of cultural analysis which is communicative have been like half-written letters. The somewhat fragmented nature of this approach is due in part to its varied sources and inspirations: in a disciplinary, scholarly sense, I was trained in communication; but my writerly roots are in prior careers as a songwriter and journalist. Since 2014, my narrative repertoire has grown through work in Puerto Rico as a professor/practitioner of creative writing.

Cultural expression is characterized, above all, by repeating patterns. In the ethnographic and communicative cultural analysis I practice, cultural expression is always in reformulation and translation. So in practice, cultural analysis is always half-written: one can suggest a trajectory, but never be definitive. However, in my returns to an evolving theory of communicative cultures, certain patterns can be discerned. My "half-written letters" about reimagining culture begin to acquire a larger shape by connecting the dots.

This notion of connecting the dots has long been a cornerstone of my teaching and cultural analysis. As I explain it to students: the ancients looked up at star patterns and imagined bears, hunters, etc. Those figures are *not there*, physically. However, through imaginative projection, observers can draw connections between the "dots" and a picture emerges. This works like children moving a pencil along a series of numbered dots until an image appears.

In my work about the communicative nature of cultural expression, discussion of various "halfies" is a recurrent theme. As already intimated, I see the cultural patterns of in-between peoples as a norm of our disjunctive era. Let us examine the role that halfies have played in gaining insight into culture as a communicative process, rather than as a property.

"HALFIES" AND THE CRITIQUE OF BOUNDED CULTURE

My understanding of culture emerged in part over ten years of residence in the "greater Caribbean." Influenced by long engagement with reggae music and its international producers and consumers, and by my marriage to/ partnership with a St. Lucian woman, I have come to experience certain Caribbean "structures of feeling" as shared (Williams). I am thinking of an affinity with post-national concepts of identity in Puerto Rico (Soto-Crespo), which leads to the sorts of interpenetrations (Stephens, "Borderland") that are characteristic of borderlands. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot remarked, some "resident intellectuals have long been interlocutors in European debates about the region." As a result, "no discursive field is fully 'ours,' or 'theirs'" ("Caribbean Region," 20). Resultant forms of intersubjectivity should be a caution to those tempted to apply *us vs. them* binaries, or procrustean forms of postcolonial theory.

My perspective on "permeable borders" in intercultural relations is grounded in a critique of the "bounded culture" concept that has endured for half a century (Abu-Lughod; Fox and King; Trouillot, "Adieu Culture"; Raud). Anthropologists have engaged in a sustained assault on the tendency to treat cultures as a *thing* or a property rather than a process (Evans 429). In fact, static views of culture and identity are pervasive in the cultural rhetorics that have emerged in the wake of ethnic studies. Political and educational institutions

are deeply invested in essentialized definitions of cultural, ethnic, or racial identity.

Lila Abu-Lughod suggests two ways to avoid a static, container concept of culture: to focus on interconnections (rather than static categories), and to engage in "ethnographies of the particular" (144). One can hardly do either without an understanding of communicative events that make interconnections possible, or express the shared commitments of cultural groups.

Abu-Lughod describes "halfies" as a "critical group" that can "expose and challenge" static concepts of culture. Halfies are in-between people "whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage" (137). Given my background as resident/ scholar of racial frontiers and borderlands; having lived outside the United States for over a decade; having fathered three biracial, bilingual children, and having had "overseas education," I am a proud "halfie." As such, I am inclined to a certain sympathy with mestizo cultures. Gruzinski's history of the "mestizo mind" is in this sense parallel to my work on the deep roots of interraciality, as part of an "interracial turn" (Stephens, "Arguing").

The cultural studies tradition, it has been argued, is a "stale" field that has "exhausted [its] potential" (Raud 3; see also Fox & King; Bonnell & Hunt). However, I agree with Cristoph Brumann that cultural theory is too valuable to be discarded. The broader "study of cultures … needs to be reinvigorated," Raud insists (5). Cultural analysis can be revisioned through a communicative lens. This approach, rooted in Hymes' "ethnography of communication," allows for necessary distance from actually existing cultural studies, with its predominant adherence to "container" models of culture.

REPEATING PATTERNS

One core definition to which I return is that *cultures are distinguished by patterns that repeat themselves*. They are "dynamically recurring patterns in social life" (Heath and Street 11). This focus on repeating patterns is widespread in cultural anthropology and related fields (Benedict; Geertz; Peterson 138; Keesing 68; Pryor 397). Culture is our matrix: a largely unconscious structure; an "*invisible structure of life*" (Reynolds & Valentine xvii). Edward Hall characterized culture as "a vast unexplored region of human behaviour that exists *outside the range of people's conscious awareness*, a 'silent language' that is usually conveyed unconsciously" (Reynolds and Valentine xix).

For pedagogical purposes, culture is an *invisible structuring pattern*. I teach students to make the patterns visible, and to narrate their structuring force. I want students to develop a sense of culture as *relational* (Desmond), *distributive* (Rodseth; Gatewood), and attuned to the "connections and interconnections" of lived cultural processes (Abu Lughod 472).

As a tool to recognize patterns in texts—including social texts, and visual narratives—I use the "Di Yanni method." This has four stages. First one observes details in the text, while deferring judgement. This is a gathering data phase. Second, one begins to connect the dots of the details observed, looking for recurring words or themes, shifts in tone, etc. Third, the analyst begins to make inferences. Fourth, one arrives at a provisional conclusion (Di Yanni 10-11).

This method is valuable for gathering information and recognizing patterns in many fields. It is a transferable skill (Stephens, "Transferable"). An analyst starts with observation, while employing self-discipline, resisting the urge to arrive at premature conclusions. She begins to make connections between different details observed, and looks for inferences in the patterns that become visible. Finally, the reader or analyst arrives at subject-to-change conclusions.

COMMUNICATIVE CULTURES AS A MATRIX FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS

A key point of reference is Swales' view of communicative events as achieving their specific form and content through a "shared set of communicative purposes." I have studied the shared commitments of groups in communicative form most fully within the "disciplined interdisciplinarity" of writing studies (Bazerman). "Communicative" is used here in the sense of *expansive* and *outgoing*. To be communicative in this sense is to try to express one's thought or message in a way that is intelligible to non-specialists, and even to those who disagree, or are inattentive. An open-ended willingness to invite others into the conversation infers that one must also learn about the communication and cultural styles of others, and tailor the conversation towards the communicative needs of people from various cultural backgrounds. To commit to an outward-directed writing and communication also infers that one will not use the sorts of language, tone, visuals, etc. that are unnecessarily exclusive.

"Communicative cultures" operate as *a shared set of commitments expressed through cultural means*. It must be acknowledged, however, that an "expansive" or "outgoing" approach is far from normative. Participants in a communicative culture can be antisocial. They may adhere to commitments we do not share. We may be opposed to, even appalled by, their objectives. Still, a communicative understanding requires us to listen dispassionately, at least in the observation stage, to the communicative styles of people or of representatives of groups whose pronounced commitments and objectives we find incomprehensible or even repugnant.

This proviso, and my ambition to extend the theory of communicative cultures beyond the realm of writing studies, is one reason why I chose as a case study "Country of the One Eye God," by the Jamaican writer Olive Senior. This ten-page story, from Senior's 1986 collection *Summer Lightning*, features a young criminal described as a rapist, a thief, and a murderer.

COUNTRY OF THE ONE EYE GOD

My approach to this story is informed by a body of research that treats literature as a resource for ethnographic investigation (Craith and Fournier; Winner). Literary texts contain cultural traces—in this case communicative cultures in Jamaica. Ethnographers can recover elements of a culture through close reading of stories, much as through studying material remains, reading diaries, or interviewing participants. My reading of the cultural milieu Senior describes is shaped by having lived in Jamaica 2004-08, and by having researched Jamaican culture long before I moved there to teach at the University of the West Indies-Mona.

I first taught "Country of the One Eye God" Fall 2019 in a Fiction Writing class at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez. I like to give students examples of how "non-traditional" or creole English(es) can be employed to write literary prose, or to augment one's communicative style in order to reach a broader audience. With this story, I also wanted to provide a model of how to write about a villain in such a way that the character remains multi-dimensional, and challenges stereotypes, rather than being reduced to a one-dimensional baddy who is too easily dismissed.

After employing the *observe the details* first reading, and beginning to connect the dots, it becomes evident that there are certain moral and rhetorical parallels between the two main characters, Ma Bell, a 76-year-old church-going, Bible-quoting matriarch in Jamaica, and her criminal, apparently amoral grandson Jacko, who is 19.

Several elements of Ma Bell's speech style attracted our attention. First, she is prone to rhetorical excess. In the first paragraph, she distills the bad news about her grandson Jacko: he is "a thief, a murderer, a hired gunman, a rapist, a jailbird, a jailbreaker," and has a price on his head. The second paragraph develops Ma Bell's tendency to pile on in describing the sufferings she and her family have endured: the nouns spill forth in a "trials of Job" variation: "deaths starvation hurricane earthquake cholera typhoid malaria tuberculosis fire diphtheria," etc. (16).

Second, Ma Bell is a very religious person, but has a peculiar relationship to her Lord. She ascribes her suffering to "struggling against the forces of a God who was sometimes deaf and blind" (16). Later we learn that the notion of a half-blind God, as in the title, is the worldview of her grandson. On a second read, we may begin to realize that the Christian grandmother, and the atheist and violent grandson, are more alike than is first apparent. Hints of their parallels can be gathered by noting the argumentative style that Ma Bell employs with her Lord, supposedly a "comforting presence." But she argues with this silent divine dialogue partner rather vociferously. As Ma Bell reflects on the heavy burdens she has carried because her children fled to the U.S. and left her to raise their children, she enters into an extended self-justification in the form of a soliloquy to her Lord.

"If I did give short in my higglering days it was because I needed it, Lord. Pickney a yard needing shoes and books and clothes…" (17). A "higgler" is a female street merchant who aggressively hustles. As a higgler, Ma Bell sometimes short-changed her customers. This small-scale theft was justified, in her view, because of the needs of the children for whom she was responsible. But one assumes that on some level her conscience still bothers her, or she would not still be chewing her moral cud in this way. Ma Bell is rather combative in her disquisition to the divine present absence, accusing him of having forgotten her, like her children did. Her interrogation has something of the character of accusation against a deity who is morally tone-deaf: "But don't you think a little cutting corner here and there is worth it? Talk truth now" (17).

A third theme that the reader observes, while moving into the connect the dots phase, is Ma Bell's dehumanizing of Jacko. This sets up certain parallels with her violent grandson.

> But that blood in him was bad from the start. A beat and a beat and it never come out… You could beat Jacko from morning till night and not a drop of eye water ever come. Is the times breeding them tough pickney. (18)

Fourth is Ma Bell's use of the Bible to attempt to draw a moral distinction between her generation, and that of her grandson. "They is truly a generation of vipers," she says to her nephew Jacob (18).

A literary-cultural analysis requires us to investigate the allusion to Matthew 12:34. Ma Bell quotes the King James Version, which is what most Jamaicans would know. In the Revised Standard Version, verse 34 continues with this famous quote: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Without the context of the Biblical text—Jesus' condemnation of Jewish religious authorities—this sounds almost inspirational. Indeed, the fullness of the heart leads to uncontainable prophecy over and over in the Old Testament. But the following verses develop the critique in a way that begins to suggest that Ma Bell's condemnation of her grandson's generation may be describing certain hypocritical behaviors of her own:

> 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

When Jacko scratches at Ma Bell's door near dawn that night, his heart is full of bile towards Ma Bell and her generation. Repeatedly, he matter-of-factly recounts their careless criticisms and indeed their corporeal violence.

Ma Bell feels that "she was still his gran and had a right to expect a show of respect, even warmth, from him" (20). Instead he shows only "cold detachment." The tension of the scene is driven by Jacko's need for money to escape the Island, or he will be a dead man. Ma Bell keeps a "special fund," a "cache of money she had hoarded for a purpose," in a pouch under her dress. The purpose was for "the most beautiful coffin that the undertaker could provide… she wanted to leave this world and enter the next cocooned in the luxury she never had in life" (22).

After eating his grandma's food, Jacko demands rum. He ignores Ma Bell's insistence: "just know yu place. Rum in this house is a big man sinting" (20). A thing of a nominally sinful nature is permitted to a

grown man. He locates the rum, downs it, then demands her money.

Here moral certainties begin to erode. Many readers may see Ma Bell as representing the self-righteous grandmothers who try to push their faith on others. Yet the text also provides reasons for sympathy and empathy. Her burdens have been disproportionate. If not for her faith, one may infer, she would not have taken up the cross of caring for all the children that her own children left behind when they fled for "foreign," i.e. the U.S., or perhaps the UK.

But Jacko begins to deliver a critique that muddies the waters. When Ma Bell demands: "Keep yu badness to yourself," he is unrepentant, and defiant. "Me hear enough talk and get enough battering from you when I small" (21).

Ma Bell's proclivity to violence, in the form of corporal punishment, has already been a part of her own Lord-directed monologue, which is part confession, part harangue. Now when she threatens to "bawl out fe murder so loud that every single soul for ten mile about hear me," Jacko is unmoved. More, he turns the tables:

> A would like to see you bawl for once for all the bawling you mek me do in my life. That is all your generation ever know how to do. How to drop lick and chastisement. (23)

It is in this context that Jacko derides the "foolishness bout God and judgement" of his grandmother's generation. With his "cold detachment," he has discovered a different truth:

> But from morning me study seh in this country fey yu God is a one eye God. Him only open him good eye to people who have everything already so him can pile up more thing on top of that. (24)

As the tension thickens and this tale moves towards an apparently inevitable violent climax, the heartless criminal keeps drawing distinctions that suggest, if not exactly a moral high ground, at least an immunity from the hypocrisies he sees in his grandma, and her generation. "I aint quick to fire blow like yu… But is a hard time we living in now" (25).

Both grandma and grandson justify theft because of hard times. Their crimes may not be equivalent, but clearly Jacko has learned some of his lessons from Ma Bell. Employing words as weapons, and being willing to use physical force, one can get what one wants. From a certain angle, Jacko's logic is irrefutable: "Give me the money. Yu soon dead and lef it yu know. What you want money for? Let it go nuh. I have the whole of my life still in front of me" (25).

When students are asked--who needs the money more in this circumstance?--their responses are split. Jacko needs the money more urgently in the moment, to survive. But he does not have a *right* to the money, they will also say. Ma Bell deserves to have a dignified burial, they may add, since she has suffered so much for this family. Yet they do not much sympathize with her. They know her moralizing type all too well.

When Jacko lifts the gun, in the story's last line, the reader is put in an uncomfortable position. Our instinct may be to root for the grandma. Yet she has not helped her cause. One infers that this is intentional on the part of Olive Senior, as author.

Jacko says three times in succession that he will give "one more chance" or ask "for the last time, give me the money" (25). Ma Bell's response is to close her eyes and pray: "please God don't let what him saying about you be true. That you is a one eye God" (25). Yet we have already seen that this matriarch considers this God to be "sometimes deaf and blind."

CONCLUSION

The preceding is a rather cursory illustration of how to detect repeating patterns in a text, in this case a literary story. "One Eye God" seems to be set in 1980s Jamaica, when the cocaine trade was overshadowing

"herbman hustling," and violence by drug lords and political strongmen was endemic. Bob Marley died in 1981, and the heyday of cultural Rastafarianism was past. The story opens a window into the "hard time" of the 1980s. Senior seems to suggest that Jacko's generation is a more extreme version of the "rude boys" for which Bob Marley was both a spokesman, and a critic, in his youth.

Reading this text as a cultural artifact, one may provisionally conclude that the last generation of the colonial era, and the generation that arose after the idealism of 1962 independence had faded, are not in full cultural opposition. On closer examination, these generations have some things in common. Their structures of feeling may be radically different. But they share a talent for rhetorical weaponry. They both stoop to moral self-justification for criminal behavior or corruption. On the level of a cultural substratum, one can detect an entrenched proclivity to use "licks and chastisement" to achieve political or economic ends.

This story also makes evident some strong differences in the "shared commitments" of the two main characters representing two once-removed generations. Ma Bell's generation follows a Biblical code. In the old-school, King James mode, this requires recurring punishment of backsliders, which is a repeating pattern in the Old Testament narrative.

Jacko's generation has presumably heard Peter Tosh's lines from the Wailers song, "Get Up, Stand Up": "If you know what life is worth / You will look for yours on earth." Of the shared commitments of his generation, it might be said that they no longer believe in delayed gratification, much less "eternal rewards" in heaven. For most of his young life, Jacko has been given a secular version of heavenly recompense. If Ma Bell clung to the belief that she would be treated in heaven better than she was treated on earth, Jacko has long since seen through the promise that one day, next year, his parents will send for him, and he will pass to the better life "in foreign."

> Look for how long I wait for them to send for me and all I ever hear is next year next year. Next year never did came for me for every year them breed up a new pickney. Them could never afford to send for me… I decide to start take my next year this year. I couldn't wait no more. (21)

Jacko and his generation have adapted a rational choice perspective, one might say. Neither the promise of rewards in heaven, nor next year *in foreign*, can be believed anymore. Seen as a communicative culture, Jacko's generation of bad boys share a commitment to using any means necessary to take, by force if necessary, what they perceive to be rightfully theirs. Ma Bell's commitments, whatever her flaws, are to family and to faith. Her faith has no appeal to most of the younger generation.

Both Ma Bell's generation and Jacko's generation have ascertained that the deity they have been told to trust has limited vision and hearing, at best. At worst, this One Eye God seems to legitimate a racket of the sort envisioned long ago in the Billie Holliday song:

> Them that's got shall get
> Them that's not shall lose
> So the Bible says
> And it still is news. (Holiday & Herzog)

Stories like "Country of the One Eye God," and the Nadine Gordimer passage, seem to answer questions about whether literature can serve as an ethnographic resource (Rapport). Craith and Fournier offer an affirmative answer to the question: "Can literature be considered as ethnography?" (1). Using literature as "a source for anthropological research" is not new: this is the start-point claim that Thomas Winner made in 1988.

Bringing communication studies and ethnography into the interstices between pedagogy and popular culture, I have tried to demonstrate some of the value of a theory of communicative cultures. Cultural patterns revealed through literature, or other cultural texts, are always communicative. The communicative

nature of social movements such as abolitionism, or the anti-apartheid movement, or decoloniality, or anti-racism, are expressed through cultural forms that allow for participation and contestation, but not necessarily for resolution. It seems safe to say that one looks in vain for closure on a "right" way to read the shared commitments expressed in those texts. This provides an opening to further research and reflection in which judgement is deferred and conclusions remain provisional.

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AUTHOR BIO

Gregory Stephens is Associate Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez, where he has taught Creative Writing to STEM students since 2014. His book Three Birds Sing a New Song: *A Puerto Rican Trilogy about Dystopia, Precarity, & Resistance* was published by Intermezzo. Short fiction includes "Taming the Mountain: Two Views of Gabriel," *Wild Roof Journal* (2021), and "Close to the Bone," *Obelus Journal* (2019). Literary nonfiction includes "Going South," *Barely South Review* (Fall 2020), and "Through the Window in St Lucia," with co-author Janice Cools, *Rigorous*: *A Journal by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color* (2021).

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