



CHAPTER 9

A Luo Girl's Inheritance

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All my life, I have heard only one story . . . What kind of story is that to grow up with?

—Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*

I had this terrible need to confess . . . It's a bid to be loved, in some way. And to be really loved; the immense difficulty of intimacy.

—Hilton Als, quoted in Emma Brockes, "Hilton Als"

I am most interested in confessional writing when it allows us to move into the personal as a way to go beyond it. In all my work I evoke the personal as a prelude. It functions as a welcoming gesture, offering the reader a sense of who I am, a sense of location.

—bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*

JaLuo 1: *Arito, afoul*. Okay, we came from the UK, United Kingdom. We landed in Sudan in Africa. We turned Black due to the climate changes and repercussions.

JaLuo 2: Of course.

JaLuo 1: Then, due to things that were happening in Sudan, we fought our way into this East Africa, Eastern Africa. We beat people,

we took the lake region, we started fishing for trade and our survival. So, we now occupy the western part of Eastern Africa, especially the middle of Eastern Africa, near the lake region.

JaLuo 1: We surround Lake Victoria.

JaLuo 2: We surround Lake Victoria. And it's now landlocked due to Luos, and we are still powerful, a powerful culture. That is to say, we are *unbwogable*.

JaLuo 1: As I want to correct it, as we were in Sudan, when we are turning Black, some of us separated in some other ways. There is some who went to northern Uganda and the entire Uganda region. Some of us went to Zaire, Congo inside, interior. You have heard some Zaireans singing here. Those are all our culture. Then, others settled around Lake Victoria, where we started fishing and practicing that. In Congo, they are called the Aluru, and in Uganda, they are called Acholi, *gi ki ang'o. Ang'o macha cha kendo?*

JaLuo 2: So many more. Acholi.

JaLuo 1: Aya. But all of them collectively, we say they are *unbwogable*.

JaLuo 2: Yes.

(GidiGidi MajiMaji 2002)



1. *Achiel*

Knock, knock.

Who's there? *Mano en ng'a?*

Ai yawa, it's me. *Anyalo donjo?*

Me who?

Me who hates meandering introductions.

2. *Ariyo*

A long time ago, when I was a girl, I asked my mother why she would not leave my father. Bewildered, she replied, "Mama, if I leave him, where will my body be buried?"

3. *Adek*

“The dead don’t go anywhere. They’re all here. Every man is a royal cemetery, in which our grandmothers and grandfathers are. The father and mother, the wife, the son. Everyone is here all the time” (Singer, as cited by Kaminsky 2022).

4. *Ang’wen*

I’m now interested in the *nowness* of things. I go around asking people stupid questions like, “What happened to the five-year-old you used to be? Is it like the Russian dolls, and you just grow over new skin and new skin?” And they say stupid things like, “Well, you know, scientists say that every seven years you grow new skin.”

... And it made me think, How does time work? (Chang 2013: paras. 20–21)

5. *Abich*

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.” (Morrison 1998: 198–9)

6. *Auchiel*

The flood that burst out of my tear ducts startled everyone in the unventilated classroom, most of all, me. I had expected the presentation in my visual methodologies class to unfold uneventfully. I had not expected an

otherwise ordinary evening to morph into the setting for a strange waterworks festival starring me. I buried my face in my perspiring palms, pushing the wetness into my skin. A budding education researcher, I was among a small group of Teachers College, Columbia University students who flocked to the class week after week. All semester long, I fed on theory under fluorescent lights, filling my mind with knowledge of immigrant and transnational children's experiences, many of which mirrored those of students I had taught as an English teacher on the South Side of Chicago or my own. The professor's directions for the assignment that opened the floodgate of tears were straightforward: we were to peruse the extensive archive of photographs and videos she had amassed as part of a study in a working-class elementary school, choose a focal child, view a video recording of that child scrutinizing his or her own photographs, and then visually analyze the child's interpretation of the still images.

Was it simply serendipity, or did Jamesha choose me? I wonder. All I know for sure is she stopped me in my tracks with her wide eyes, puckered lips, and brown nose pressed into the lens of the camera responsible for the first photograph I touched. I held the image between the thumb and index finger of my right hand. A giggle escaped my mouth. I put the glossy photo paper on the tip of my nose as if to say, "Hello. I choose you, too." Then, we exchanged banter for a bit:

Her: Um, why'd you gimme a fake name like Jamesha? It's kinda boring. If you'd have asked, I would have told you I'm much more like a, uh, I don't know, Samantha.

Me: Knock, knock.

Her: Ugh! OK, I'll play. Who's there?

Me: Jamesha. Now, did you know your name means one who is "courageous, honest, determined, original and creative . . . a leader, especially for a cause . . . bold, independent, inquisitive and interested in research" (Seven Reflections n.d.: para. 1)?

Her: You're funny. I didn't know that.

A toothy smile pasted on her face, Jamesha stretched out her arms and snatched me out of my world. She pulled me into her orbit and introduced me to her family. Happiness tinged her voice as she spoke to an interviewer, me, about her father. Jamesha enchanted me. Spellbound by her ebullient voice, I fiddled with software and created a video, placing her insights in conversation with a photograph from my archive of family albums.

In that photograph (see Figure 9.1), my father, mother, and I, at age five or so, are in Ligega, near the colonial border separating Kenya from Uganda, outside the home my father later inherited from my paternal grandfather. My mother and I are staring at the camera. My father is holding me close to his chest. He is gazing at me lovingly, I tell myself. I am multitasking, busy balancing a half-empty bottle of Fanta Orange soda in my small hands and suspiciously eyeing the mysterious photographer.

I captioned this photograph with a reference to Lucille Clifton's (1969) "Good Times." I read the poem aloud in class, crumpling in front of my alarmed colleagues as the last few lines fell from my mouth. My tears found refuge in the space between my nose and upper lip. I had not expected to cry at all, let alone so deeply, so loudly, so publicly. Drenched in salty tears and the hot shame of embarrassment, I stilled my nerves long enough to mumble my way through the rest of the presentation.

The truth is that my childhood remembrances of my father involve few recollections of good times. My father was a bruised man and, in Gramscian terms, an organic intellectual (Gramsci 1999). The truth is that his brainpower did not make him fast enough to either outrun the torment of his childhood or tame the demons that, in adulthood, inhabited the dark recesses of his beautiful mind. The truth is, he broke me. My



Figure 9.1. Daddy, Mommy, and me. Author photo.

daddy was a tornado, and my idea of childhood innocence, a necessary lie, was lost in the debris of his destructive path.

Perhaps I cried in class because I was mourning the ideal father and perfect childhood that the photograph reminded me I desired but lacked or lost on the road to adolescence and adulthood. Perhaps I wept because I was wise enough to know that despite the missing borne of mourning, parental perfection is a fiction, even in familial contexts less turbulent than my own. Perhaps I was shaken by the truth documented in that photograph, which tells of a time when my mother was not carrying or holding a child. For a moment, she was free of the burden of motherhood. For just that fleeting moment, she was free.

I fled class as soon as I was free to leave, but I could not fight back a fresh torrent of tears. En route to my apartment, as the train dove under the Harlem River, I replayed the scene I had made. Between sobs, I became more keenly aware of the tender spot that family photograph had touched. I needed to probe that rawness. I needed to remember where I had been and what valleys I had run through to locate the source of my river of tears. I needed to journey along that emotional path to find my way back home, to my original place.

7. *Abiriyo*

In 1993, two decades before I became yet another poor graduate student submerged in a tidal wave of tears on a subway in New York City, New York, my mother was living in the city of Columbia, studying at the University of South Carolina. English was not her mother tongue. Despite the prestige of being named a Fulbright scholar, she harbored insecurities about her ability to write skillfully in the Queen's English. Still, her struggles with the psychological effects of linguistic imperialism did not prevent her from penning and publishing two essays in *Sunrise*, the in-house print journal associated with the university's English Programs for Internationals. She explained how patriarchy propelled gender disparity in her home context:



In many African countries, Kenya included, female children are bred by a paternalistic society that imprisons and confines them to the back-

stage throughout their lifetime. In Kenya there are 42 different ethnic groups. Each group has its own traditional beliefs and practices. These vary slightly but generally there are a lot of similarities regarding the way the women are treated.

In the past the female child grew up in a very hostile environment. Right from infancy, the female child was treated less compassionately than the male child. There was marked preference for male children over female children. The parents argued that sons would take care of them in their old age and that daughters would be married off elsewhere and so would not be very useful to them. If in a family there were both boys and girls and their parents did not have enough money to educate them, then ways had to be found to get some money to pay school fees for the boys. The girls would be forced to provide cheap labor somewhere else or get married off. It was a traditional practice for the bridegroom to pay some dowry to the parents of the girl. This boosted the parents' income and could help pay for the education of the boys in the family.

In other circumstances, the girl child was in danger of being married off at an early age, sometimes as early as 10 years old. The child bride, more often than not, was married off to an old man five or six times her age. If this happened, then it meant the girl was joining a polygamous marriage. The planning and the decision for such marriages was done by the male members of the girl's family without any consultation with the girl.

Once married, the role of the woman was to give birth to children, rear them and take care of household matters. As no family planning existed, most women had very many children. It was not uncommon to find one woman with as many as 15 children. In addition to their role as mothers, they were also expected to grow subsistence crops. The women worked very hard and for long hours every day while the men spent their time in beer halls discussing how to discipline their wives. If the women complained of maltreatment by the men, they were beaten.

There were also certain foods that women were forbidden to eat even though they were the cooks for the men. Among the LUO ethnic group, for example, foods like mutton, chicken and eggs were strictly for men and their sons. The wives and daughters were fed on less nutritious foods. Moreover women were exposed to certain health hazards. Due to poor nutrition, hard labor and lack of proper medical care, many of them died of complications during childbirth and other poverty related

diseases. *The average life expectancy for women was only 40 years. This was the world in which my greatgrandmother and grandmother lived.*

With the coming of Christianity those traditional beliefs that were considered harmful were discarded. However, some customs that discriminated against women are still being practiced today. Most men would like to retain their traditional way of life as much as possible but they have to accept certain realities. Recently, in 1963, the constitution was changed to make life easier for the Kenyan woman. Dowry, child marriages, and wife beating were banned. Free education at the primary level for all children was introduced. Consequently today the ratio of girls to boys in primary level school enrollment is 2:3. There are also more girls attending secondary school level education than there were 30 years ago. In the universities, the proportion of female students is only about 10 percent but is steadily rising.

The traditional way of marriage is also dying slowly. Modern parents rarely accept dowry from their son-in-law. Furthermore as more and more girls attend school, the age at marriage is also increasing and now they can choose their partners.

However, there are still other problems that face women. Kenya's birthrate is 4 percent per year. This is quite high by any standard. Family planning is practiced by only 30 percent of Kenyan women. There is high maternal and infant mortality rates. The root cause of these problems can be traced to poverty. In fact poverty makes it more difficult for Kenyan women to acquire educational skills needed to get more desirable and highly paid occupations so that they can improve the standard of living of their families. There is also continued marginalization of women. Women and men are not evenly represented in every consequential aspect of national life. For example, no woman has ever been appointed to a ministerial position since our national independence. Women are kept away from national politics by a tradition that regards them as docile, submissive, and inward looking human beings. The woman has no business breaking the past. If she does, she is branded a dissident. Society views with suspicion women who contradict traditional expectations.

Hopefully, it is not too late for Kenyan women to be held back by backward beliefs. They need to work very hard for their rights. In the future our society should make a conscious effort to involve women in development projects, especially in the areas of agriculture, environment, education and health. This should be done through a reduction

of disparities in access to educational levels for both men and women. Positive gender roles should be portrayed and women should be allowed equal access to information and decision-making bodies. Family planning should target men who by virtue of tradition have greater influence on family affairs. Men should not see women as a threat but as equal partners in development.

It is pathetic that women all over the world are being discriminated against. But there is hope. If the United Nations can recognize this as a human rights violation, take it seriously, and debate the issues, then all women, including Kenyan women, can hope to live in a better world in the near future. (Ohito 1993: 46–48)



8. Aboro

Once, my father saved my life. Twice, my daddy nearly killed me. I was to blame the first time, at Uchumi supermarket in Lang'ata, when the palm of his right hand landed heavily on my left cheek once, then again and again and again and again and again and again. In a dimly lit room with nary an air vent in sight, his flesh slapped against mine, each strike a hailstone landing on soft ground, one after the other and the other and the other and the other and the other and the other and the other. A fluorescent-strip light fixture dangled from the ceiling, directly above a metal table. Two black walkie-talkies on the otherwise barren table were the only clue that a security control room was the setting for this raging storm.

A framed portrait of Jesus, red fabric draped over his shoulder, brown beard complementing his pink skin, hung near the door, to the right of a slightly larger portrait of President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi. Rumor had it that the president had the eyes of a goat. Rumor had it that nearly a decade earlier, in 1982, the year after I was born, he survived the betrayal of soldiers who swarmed the RAF Eastleigh Air Base in a failed coup attempt because of his horizontal pupils. He could spot danger lurking on the periphery. My eyes were shut as the final slap brought the right side of my head in contact with the table's edge. The taste of iron overwhelmed my mouth as I hit the floor. My outstretched arm had failed to break my fall. I moved the swollen tip of my trembling tongue across my gums and teeth,

pushing into fleshy meat and uneven enamel edges. A loose molar buckled under pressure, sending shooting pains to the roof of my mouth full of blood. I grimaced. Eyes shut, still, I placed my right hand on my forehead as other sounds in the room floated into my ringing ears: the quiet sobs of my pregnant, swollen-footed mother who sat lopsided on a metal chair in the corner of the sparsely furnished room, her neck grazing the collar of a blue muumuu; the loud raspy voices of the two men who had trailed me around the store; the stealthy starving cats who had watched me slip a small bottle of nail polish into the pocket of my school uniform, then pounced. The shorter man, the one with a protruding belly the size of a large watermelon, had kind eyes. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me now, prey sprawled on the tiled floor of a badly lit room. I wondered if he recognized my uniform, a pink gingham dress paired with a persimmon-colored V-neck wool sweater. I wondered if he recognized me.

I bopped past the supermarket in Lang'ata daily on my way to and from school. Uchumi was my favorite place to be, despite its misnomer of a name, given that little there was economical for the average Kenyan. "Unachotaka"—what you want—would have been a more apt moniker; everything in the store stoked desire. My leisurely trips to Uchumi occurred monthly. On the first day of each month, Daddy and Mommy would pick up her salary, then pick up "the kids"—my sisters and me—from school. Our crammed car would then barrel down Ngong Road until Uchumi was on the horizon. Our parents' laughter in the car foreshadowed a good afternoon. How much laughter indicated how good of an afternoon we would have. Boisterous laughter meant Daddy would be home the next morning before Sister and I left the house to board a *matatu* to Wilson Airport, then a bus to Kenyatta Market, before embarking on a longish walk on an unpaved road, where racing cars blew ginger-colored dust onto our onyx-black hair as we approached St. Nicholas Primary School. Silence was a warning sign: we were to be well behaved while patiently waiting in the car until Daddy and Mommy rejoined us, Mommy carrying white plastic shopping bags. Sister and I played our version of a guessing game in the car to bide time and kill boredom:

"Knock, knock. Hodi. What's there?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing what?"

"Nothing you want!"

Giggles erupted from our cores. Between gasps for air, we guessed what we could not afford to buy this month. Sister was usually right. Homeward

bound, we would drop Daddy off at the strip of bars in Nairobi West. There was a ritual: Mommy would pull a wad of banknotes out of the white envelope kept concealed in the zippered pocket of her black purse, and hand it to Daddy, who would slip the money into the left front pocket of his pants. Then, Daddy would disappear. Once his back was swallowed by the buzzed and buzzing crowd of Nairobians, Mommy would drive off, her shoulders dropping as the distance between him and us increased.

Uchumi was enthralling. Exhilaration surged through my veins as I ran my fingers across items stacked neatly on shelves, touching the promise of rebirth. A wondrous new existence awaited me in the sweets aisle by the Cadbury Bournville Old Jamaica and Dairy Milk chocolates. There, I could transform into Princess Diana, plucked from obscurity by a dashing future king with rosy skin. In the meat aisle, beside the freezer stocked with packages of Farmer's Choice sausage, I could be a benevolent dictator's daughter swept off my feet by the derring-do of my beloved, or the captive of a handsome rebel soldier trapped in a castle in Luxembourg. I could live my grandest life in the makeup and nail polish aisle, reincarnated as a pop singer, a Mariah Carey, a brown-haired chanteuse with flesh the color of light pink fish. I could stand in the middle of the aisle and belt out a love song for an admiring audience under bright lights on an elevated stage while my music producer paramour, a *mzungu* like Tommy Mottola—ponytailed, wealthy, and white—stared adoringly as I crooned.

What scenarios would my dissociative dreams consist of now that an evening at my sanctuary was concluding with the imprint of Daddy's right hand on my left cheek and stubborn blood spots on my uniform? I had never imagined a protruding-bellied man in Uchumi placing his cigar-length fingers on Daddy's shoulder, telling him sternly to stop. We made a solemn exit out of the supermarket as the sun set. Before our departure, Daddy and the man with the watermelon stomach reached an agreement: to atone, I would spend a day in prison with my kind, sinners.

"It was my idea, of course!" Daddy roared a week later. Uncle listened intently, perched on the golden velvet couch occupying most of the living room in the two-story Rubia Estate house. The brothers were thick as thieves. Uncle frequently disappeared for weeks. Whenever he reappeared, as he had done today, Daddy's guttural growl would echo in every room. "She's a thief!" he barked. By my count, his proclamation bounced around the house three times: She's a thief! She's a thief! She's a thief!

Uncle called for me, tapping the soft cushion to his left when I appeared at the living room door. I nodded, plopping close enough for his

body to emanate heat that warmed my cold thighs and finding comfort in the familiar mélange of Brut cologne, floral-scented perfume, and old tobacco that mingled close to his chest.

“Nyandere, you did a bad thing,” Uncle chastised.

“Yes, I know, Uncle,” I said, head hung low.

“You must be punished. When you are bad, you must be punished.”

“Yes, I know, Uncle.”

Satisfied by my contrition, Uncle patted my thigh, signaling that it was time for me to stand, then told me to go upstairs to the bedroom I shared with fourteen-year-old Sister. I obeyed his command. I left the sitting room with my chin stuck to my chest, walking past the sapphire wall, then up the two sets of cement stairs that connected the first and second floors, wiggling my loose molar the whole way. I did not want the tears to cascade down my face. I wanted the punishment I had earned.

Daddy had ordered me to be spiffily dressed the next morning before the first rooster crowed. Years later, I would remember this as the Day of Reckoning. What he would do, he told Uncle as they exited the house headed for Nairobi West, was drop me off at the front office of The Prison.

The countdown to the neighbor’s fat rooster’s morning cry began as soon as the cold heels of my bare feet touched Sister’s warm toes. Her right palm pressed into my stomach, quieting its shrieks. “What do you think it’s like in there?” Sister whispered into my ear. I pretended like I didn’t hear her, like her words did not send high-voltage electrical currents through my sacral nerves, like the wetness spreading in the mattress did not matter.

The cock’s crow found Daddy and me seated in Rabbit, the baby blue Daihatsu Charade that he and Mommy had bought from a Japanese expat, a former soldier who had retired from the outskirts of Tokyo to a custom-built two-story house in Lavington with a garden full of red, white, and pink carnations that invited thoughts of Eden. The lop-eared Japanese man had stuck a white flower in my hair as Daddy charmed him with tales of his time in the Kenya Defense Forces. Daddy eventually bargained down the Daihatsu’s sale price to a few hundred shillings less than Mommy had placed in a white envelope with his name on it. Today, Daddy sat in the Daihatsu’s driver’s seat, the pants of his pinstriped suit hiked up slightly at the knee, making it easier for his left foot to reach the clutch. He had placed his jacket neatly on the passenger side, and from time to time, he glanced at the rearview mirror. I avoided his glowering looks, keeping my chin to my chest and my mouth closed for the dura-

tion of the ride. My skin, the color of a ripe plum, glistened in the rising Nairobi sun.

That morning, I had used my index finger to scoop and slather scented Vaseline on my round face as Sister simultaneously rubbed the thick, gooey substance onto my bamboo legs. She saved a smidge of the petroleum jelly made to smell like a newborn baby's bottom for the surface of my black Bata shoes, which she helped me slip onto my feet. She had ironed and starched the pink dress with white stripes that I wore only on special occasions. The dressmaker, a slim tailor, asked my age when he took my measurements. He lingered as he wrapped a tape measure around my chest and grazed my grape-sized nipples. "Ten," I replied. His eyes enlarged. "You look much younger," he said, his tongue stroking the scaly, dry skin on his lower lip.

I would not leave The Prison alive if the place was anything like I had heard through the rumor mill. This was the truth I could not share with Sister as she held my stomach during the night or, that morning, combed my hair, taming it into a ponytail the size of an acorn. I was going to meet death. This was not conjecture. My teacher, Mrs. Mwangi, knew someone who knew someone who knew someone's husband who had a friend whose cousin patrolled the grounds at The Prison. On the occasions when Mrs. Mwangi observed questionable behavior in the classroom, she would suck her teeth, then remind us that bad children were sent to The Prison to be killed. A veil of terror would fall over the silent class. I would imagine shit-smelling, muscular men with sharpened teeth and tattered clothes clanging metal bars while menacing guards paraded up and down narrow hallways. They would kill me at The Prison; I knew this with certainty. But death at a prisoner's hands seemed to be a less painful, less shameful demise than the one certain to arrive if my principal, Mrs. Njuguna, discovered that I was a thief. And she would, most certainly, find out because for the second time this term, I would be marked absent from school today. Mrs. Njuguna would notice, if only because this time my school fees were paid.

Rabbit flew by the open-air market outside Kenyatta National Hospital, where young women with old eyes and old women with dead eyes carried in their calloused hands guavas, mangoes, onions, and tomatoes for sale and where the eyes of starving teenagers with skin leathered by the unforgiving sun beckoned, promising that for the right price, you could purchase more than fruits and vegetables. I craned my neck as we passed All Saints' Cathedral where, weeks prior, I had peered into a pol-

ished cherry wood casket carrying the body of my dead classmate, Brenda. Until the day she died, Brenda, too, had perfect attendance, so I intuited that something was awry when her seat was empty on a Friday morning a few weeks ago. At Morning Assembly the next Monday, Mrs. Njuguna announced that Brenda had died, then led us in reciting the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Before Rabbit bolted past the church, it had not dawned on me that Brenda may also have met death at The Prison. I wondered if they would remember her at The Prison. I wondered about my own funeral, too. Would I lie in a velvet-lined casket while my father and mother eulogized me? Would Daddy tell everyone I was a thief?

The Prison's parking lot teemed with life. There were scores of prisoners there, most of whom would likely find themselves fighting diarrhea, tuberculosis, scabies, or worse while serving time for armed robbery, rape, drug trafficking, murder, or any other such violent crimes. I wondered about the men tending the grounds as Daddy drove the Daihatsu through the metal gates, halting at the spot closest to the main door. What lives had the prisoners lost? What pasts were they forced to confront while rotting in the place they now called home? My abdomen cramped. My throat tightened. My heart rate endeavored to catch up to my increasingly rapid breathing as Daddy and I walked into the front office. I bargained with God's son in song:

I will trust and obey
for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus
but to trust and obey.

The nondescript interior of the front office at The Prison resembled that of the front office at St. Nicholas Primary School: there was a large wooden desk in one corner of the room, by the windows with rusty metal bars. Standing beside the desk with a stack of papers in his hand was a tall man dressed in a brown suit that matched the brown frames of his glasses. He touched the forest green tie on his neck as Daddy and I approached the desk. Daddy spoke, and as he explained the purpose for our presence at The Prison, the look of confusion on the man's peanut butter brown

face intensified. Then, he shook his head vigorously, released a sigh, and said, "*Owada, awuoro*. You cannot just leave this girl here."

Daddy appeared startled, dismayed. He pressed the tip of his right index finger into the middle of my oily forehead. "*Osiepa*, she's a thief! Nyako ni is a thief!"

The warden peered over his glasses. Moments of silence elapsed. Then, he pursed his lips, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "OK."

Daddy smiled broadly, shook the warden's hand, then turned to leave the office. Warm liquid trickled down my inner thighs and collected in my shoes as I watched him walk out and disappear into the parking lot. Once the Daihatsu was out of sight, the warden sighed again and cleared his throat.

"Come here," he commanded, his deep baritone booming. My heart raced even faster. Had the odor from my wet panties wafted into his wide nostrils?

"Come," he repeated, his voice softer.

I obeyed, my pee-filled shoes squishing as I put one foot in front of the other trepidatiously. "Here," the warden whispered, as he reached into his pocket and handed me a half-eaten Cadbury Fudge Bar. "You will be my assistant for the day. Now, sit there," he said, pointing to a metal chair behind the desk. I obeyed, chin grazing the collar of my dress.

Daddy returned to The Prison at dusk. That night, after supper, I collapsed onto my twin-sized bed. I had shut the door before falling onto the lumpy mattress. Sister lay across from me in a similar bed and kept her back turned toward me. I launched into a recitation of the Lord's Prayer loudly enough for Daddy and Mommy to hear as they fell asleep in the adjacent room. Palms clasped and eyes facing the ceiling, I prayed fervently, asking God to "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Sister had been silent since I had arrived home from The Prison. I didn't know why. Maybe she can smell my *susu*, I thought. No. Maybe she's angry with me. Are you angry with me? I wanted to ask. I didn't confess. I didn't betray you. I didn't tell, I wanted to whisper. I didn't tell Daddy it was your idea. I kept your secret. I keep your secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep . . . our secrets.

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“Esther? Are you awake?”

“Yeah,” I replied hoarsely, eyes shut.

“When I grow up, I’m going to join the Israeli army.”

“What? Why?” I asked, eyes open.

“I hear they train the best killers,” Sister said calmly.

“You want to be a killer?”

“No, but I want to kill him. I’m going to kill him.”

9. Ochiko

Once upon a time, on Lake Victoria’s shores, there lived a JaLuo named Nyamgodho wuod Ombare. Nyamgodho, the son of Ombare, was a fisherman by trade. This means that he was a very, very poor man. Perpetually starving, he spent dusk to dawn daily seeking food, shelter, and the kindness of fond strangers.

Early one morning, Nyamgodho woke up startled, his empty stomach wailing. I’m going to die, *yawa*, he thought, as hunger pangs ravaged his intestines. He shook his head in part disbelief and part resignation. Cradling his crying belly, he used the lingering remnant of strength he possessed to walk to the lake and waddle into its fresh waters. “Perhaps God will bless me today,” he muttered as he cast his fishing net, “*Nyasaye nyalo mia ndalo mang’eny*.” Seconds later, he felt a tug. Had God heard this poor man’s lament at last? Marveling at the possibility that the good Lord had delivered a long-awaited response, Nyamgodho hurriedly pulled at the net until its contents lay at his jigger-infested feet. He squinted, then looked closer at the mass of flesh he had fished. “*Ai yawa, awuro!*” he exclaimed, shocked to see a woman in his net. But she was not just any woman; this woman was exceptional.

Nyamgodho suspected God had a perverse sense of humor. Truly, what value was there to be found in a hideous, one-eyed woman? What was he to do with a burden such as this? Nyamgodho sucked his teeth, furious that his precious energy reserves had been wasted on saving something, someone, so useless. He was prepared to toss the net and its contents back into Lake Victoria's eager waters, but the woman pled for mercy. Her powers of persuasion worked magic on Nyamgodho. He agreed and not only kept her out of the lake but also married her, making her his first wife. "I will make you wealthy in return," she promised, but on one condition: "You must swear to keep the story of my origin secret." Nyamgodho, seduced by the allure of riches, agreed without hesitation.

True to her word, the woman of the lake worked very, very hard, making Nyamgodho very, very rich. Newly prosperous, he acquired many cattle and more wives. As his possessions increased, so did his pride—a disposition others called arrogance—and penchant for moonshine.

Late one night, Nyamgodho arrived at his homestead so drunk that none of his wives would have him. Even his first wife, the woman of the lake, refused to entertain him. Nyamgodho was floored by what he deemed disrespectful behavior. "How dare you!" he seethed outside her front door. "You are the ugliest of creatures, yet I rescued you from the lake. How dare you refuse me!" But the woman of the lake was unmoved. "Nyamgodho, *chuora*, have you forgotten our agreement?" she asked, her voice steady. Nyamgodho cackled. He had become a wealthy man and, by his calculations, could not afford a disobedient wife. "I curse you!" he shouted, wagging his index finger as he sauntered away from her door.

The woman uttered not a word. She calmly collected the few items she owned and departed on foot, headed for Lake Victoria. Nyamgodho watched her from the window in his *simba*. His indignation soon turned to indifference and then horror as a long procession of cattle followed her, vanishing, one by one, into the freshwater lake, until there was none left in the homestead. The woman waded into Lake Victoria at Nyandiwa Gwassi, but only after creating rock formations shaped as footprints of the bovine companions that accompanied her back to her original place.

They say that during low tide in Nyandiwa Gwassi, the animal footprints are visible. They say there is medicine in the waters that flow over the footprints. They say this is where the JoLuo congregate for healing. They say there is a tree shaped like a human being that grows by the lake. They say this is what became of Nyamgodho, this is what the woman of

the lake made him before she dove into its fresh waters. They say, after God, fear Luo women (Osunde 2021).

10. *Apar*

In 1858, the London-based Royal Geographical Society sponsored an expedition to Africa for the purpose of locating the source of the river Nile. That year, Captain John Hanning Speke (1864) of the British Indian Army stumbled upon a body of water known to the locals, the JoLuo, as Nam Lolwe. Speke must have reasoned the lake needed a name that could roll off the tongues of *jonango*, so he gave it that of his country's queen, Victoria. I wonder what the JoLuo thought, watching from afar as this man with salmon-colored skin flopped around like a tilapia in waters that belonged to the woman of the lake.

In 1936, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1965) traveled to Luo country. During his six weeks of fieldwork, he produced a body of data that included a photograph depicting a tall man wearing a white collared shirt underneath a jacket, standing beside a woman seated on a wooden chair (see Figure 9.2). Like the man, she is barefoot. Her hands are clasped, and she appears to be holding on to the baby, who—despite being dangerously close to sliding off her lap—appears more interested in the texture of his brother's skin than the fact that his mother's strength is the only thing keeping him safe. The three children are holding on to the woman's arms in different ways, even as their eyes refuse to meet the camera's lens, perhaps illustrating different degrees of (un)attachment. The man's arms are behind his back, suggesting that his fingers are intertwined. He is holding on to himself.

The caption speaks for the photograph, verifying a visual lie. Captured in this still image is a cluster of people commonly conceived of as a nuclear family, a concept foreign to the Luo of the time. What the photograph documents is the JoLuo consanguined by blood but framed within a colonial definition of family. The photograph is a miseducative artifact about Luo sociality and relationality. The image does not tell the truth about how we know ourselves to be in relation to ourselves and to other human beings and living things. A wealth of Luo knowledge about land, ancestry, heritage, customs, and gendered cultural practices is lost within the image's frame. The photograph illustrates colonial violence vis-à-vis the erasure of Indigenous epistemology. Unanchored to that knowledge,

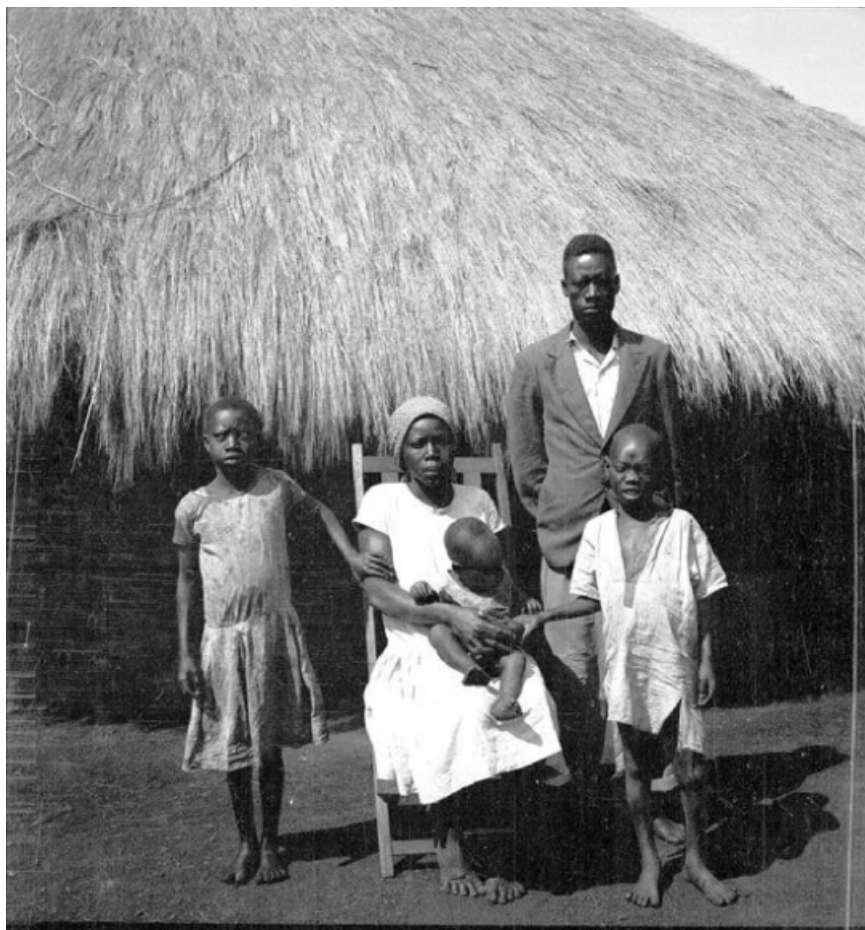


Figure 9.2. “A Portrait of a Luo Family outside One of Their Thatched Houses, Identified as Josiah and Family.” Photograph by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1936). Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History, Oxford, UK. 1998.349.139.1.

we are displaced, destined to forget where we belong, what to believe and value, what is worth knowing and treasuring about ourselves, and how to cure the pains that ail our bodies, minds, spirits, and hearts—pains inextricably linked to the human condition. What truths do we deserve to reclaim? What knowledge is owed to us, the living, by the dead? What must we remember in order to weather assaults on our ways of knowing and being? What knowledge of ourselves do we have a right to (re)write in our own voices?

The caption also speaks for the photographer. A researcher born in 1902, Evans-Pritchard remains widely regarded as among the most notable anthropologists of the twentieth century. He is a seminal figure in a discipline “rooted in colonial extraction: of resources and knowledge, destruction of sacred spaces, and the intentional disruption of language, customs, spirituality, and cultural identity” (Mohammed et al. 2022: para. 6). It has been argued that he “broke new ground on questions of rationality, social accountability, kinship, social and political organization, and religion, as well as influentially moving the discipline in Britain away from the natural sciences and towards history” (Morton 2019: blurb). Parenthesizing Evans-Pritchard’s celebrated contributions to anthropological knowledge and methods of inquiry, I wonder about his impact in Luo country and on Luo people. What imprint did his research leave on JoLuo? What epistemic consequences among JoLuo resulted from his positioning of us as objects to be known rather than subjects with expert knowledge of our own human experience? If Evans-Pritchard had perceived himself to be a curious pupil rather than a master teacher, then perhaps he would have learned from the native informants, who fished in Nam Lolwe’s waters and tilled the land, that only a poor Luo man would find satisfaction in one wife and three children and that only a piss-poor Luo man bereft of pride would allow his poverty to be preserved for eternity in a white man’s photograph. Evans-Pritchard would also have discovered that on Luo land, a man with no pride is no man at all.

Singh, a scholar of languages and literatures, postulated that

a colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially *and* by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders “legitimate” the forceful imposition of his worldviews. (2018: 9)

Behind the lens, the photographer is God. “Click,” shutters the camera, instantly creating a picture in His image that evidences a disappearing feeling, a dissipating presence, a fading present. Yet, a photograph “cannot be understood through visual content alone but through an embodied engagement with an affective object world, which is both constitutive of and constituted through social relations” (Edwards 2012: 221).

Conceptualizations of family vary depending on historical, social, and cultural context, but a constant truism is that families contain some of the densest entanglements of social relations known to humans. This explains the force of family photographs, which move us, affectively, to our origin,

whether or not we wish to revisit the truths and lies buried in that place. Family photographs prove that we are put in place by familial bonds, however broken or betrayed. These images can be glue when we find ourselves pining for the past or, in the present, piecing together fragments of ourselves, our families, and those parts of ourselves lost to ourselves and our families. The light enters at the broken place, Rumi is rumored to have remarked. Family photographs can be floodlights illuminating the path toward that wound, visual reminders that sometimes we tell ourselves fictional stories about our families to make sense of ourselves and to make ourselves make sense. Sometimes we need fictions to face facts. Sometimes we need to filter through facts and fictions to face hard truths about lies. Sometimes lies are true stories, too.

11. *Apar Gachiel*

The other day, Brother rang. I do not usually pick up the phone when he calls. This time, I did, not knowing why. Brother is not really my brother. I mean, he is, but it is a long story.

Him: I'm in Hawaii. You've been here before, right?

Me: Yeah, but I can't remember which island I visited. I don't know.

Him: You have such a bad memory.

Me: I do, don't I?

Oh, brother. Maybe I do. Sometimes I think I choose to forget.

12. *Apar Gariyo*

The tall man wearing a white collared shirt in this photo (see Figure 9.3) is my grandfather, the Honorable James Ezekiel Mbori Yogo of Saye Village, Rachuonyo South Sub-County, son of the late Yogo Ong'ondo and Maria Acholla. Born in 1932, my grandfather began his career in education, then transitioned to politics, serving as the minister of Parliament of Kasipul-Kabondo Constituency and the assistant minister for local government. My grandfather, wuod Ong'ondo, was survived by two of his four wives and by most of his twenty-four children, fifty-one grandchildren, and seventeen great-grandchildren. He died in 2017, on the seventeenth day of June.

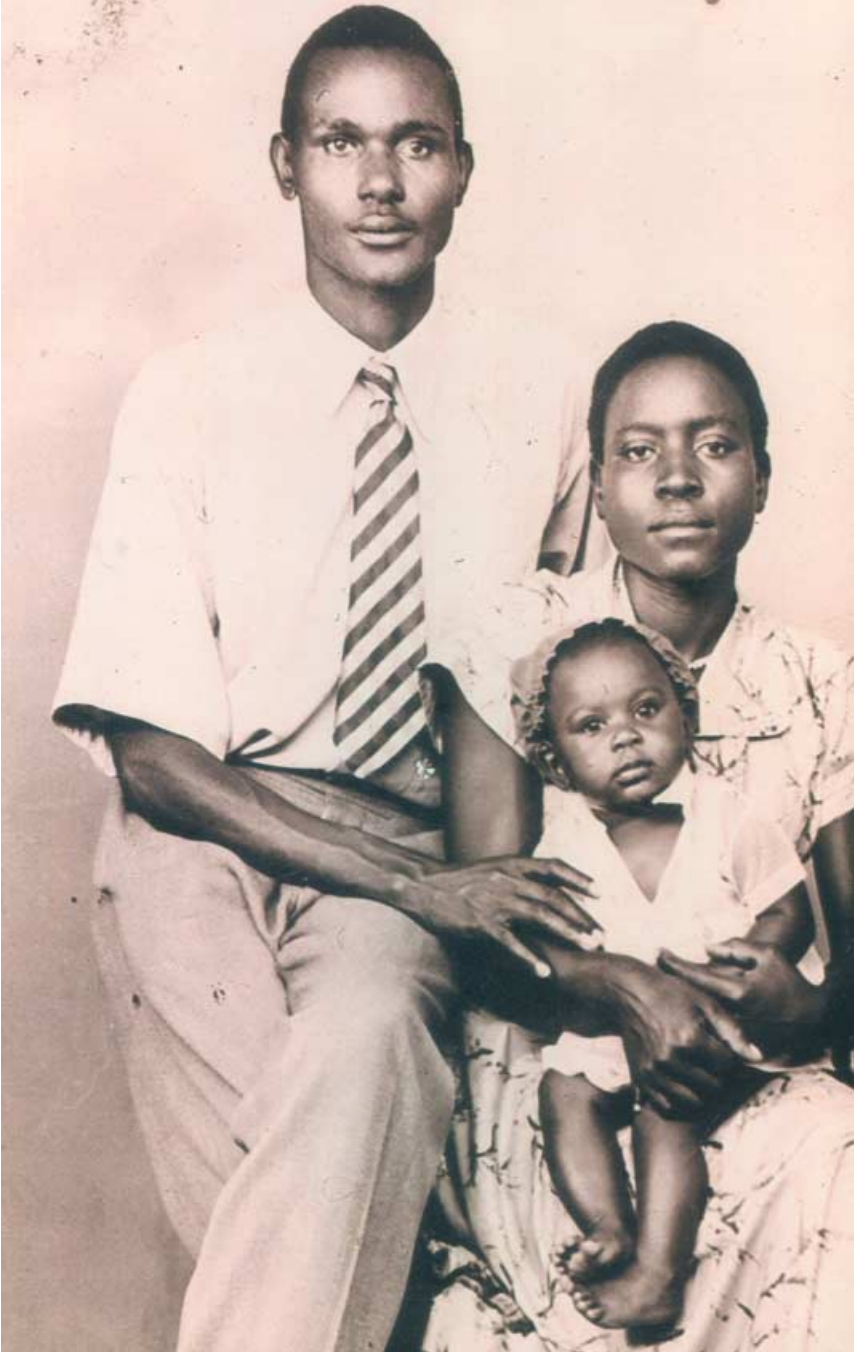


Figure 9.3. Grandfather, Dani, and Mommy. Author photo.

The woman in this photograph is *kwara's* first wife, his *mikayi*. Mama Esther—*jok moko luonge ni* Oganda, Nya'Sango, Nyar g'Odongo, *koso* Min Nyiri—is my grandmother, my namesake. The baby in this image is reaching for her mother, my grandmother. The mother is there. The mother is always there. The baby is safe. The baby will become my mother. I will not know her as a baby or a girl, only as a mother. This means I will hardly know her at all.

Barthes (1981: 53) claimed that “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes.” The French philosopher proposed that focusing on the facts surrounding a photograph, the historical, social, and cultural contexts, offers only partial insight. Engaging the feelings that arise from probing the aspects of a photograph that capture the viewer's attention—for example, noticing my grandfather's elegant, veined hand resting on my grandmother—creates avenues for discovering the old anew. Photographs, in this regard, are not merely artifacts; they are keys to unlocking memory, and tools for remembering and (re)constructing the family and the familiar.

13. *Apar Gadek*

Cousin philosophizes intermittently on Instagram. Months ago, she posted a recent photograph of my grandmother, along with a lengthy caption:

A home without girls is like a river without a source. That's the woman from where I've come from if you didn't know. She is very learned and was a teacher by profession. She didn't drop out of school to get married like other women did. She taught her children and grandchildren morals and lessons; one of the things she taught is your sister is your best friend, *en jakori*. Never get married to your sister's husband. *Kik itim nyiego gi nyaminu. Mano ne en kwero. Aheri ahinya Dana nya nyakach. Mama maonge ngama inyalo pim godo. Nya nyadhi yaani class.* I love you grannie, *nyasaye omedi ndalo mangeny.* (Awuor 2021)

14. *Apar Gang'wen*

Sometimes we tell ourselves fictional stories about our families to make sense of ourselves and make ourselves make sense. Sometimes we need fictions to face facts. Sometimes we need to filter through facts and fictions to face hard truths about lies. Sometimes we imagine that lies are true

stories, too. Sometimes we try to twist history, to turn wrongs right and write happy endings where none exist.

15. *Apar Gabich*

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Esther O. Ohito, EdD, is a creative writer, curriculum and cultural theorist, and educational researcher. She is an associate professor of English/literacy education at Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Broadly, her lines of inquiry concern the entangled politics of Blackness, gender, race, and knowledge production at the nexus of curriculum, pedagogy, embodiment, and emotion. Her research agenda is split into three overlapping strands: the poetics and aesthetics of Black knowledge and cultural production, the gendered geographies of Black girlhoods, and the gendered pedagogies of Black critical educators. Her interdisciplinary research is as inspired by Black intellectual traditions as by (memories of) her lived experiences, including her stories as a multilingual, transnational, first-generation Black/African/Kenyan immigrant student in the United States, a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system, and a US-based teacher/educator in various educational spaces across the African diaspora. She is a member of the Black Girlhoods in Education Research Collective.

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