

# AU NATUREL



## Salon & Personal Updates

As I'm writing this missive, the view outside of my hotel room is the one that you see above. (Click on the image for a beautiful jazz testimony to our mantra: *Embrace the beauty of you.*) Welcome to beautiful Senegal! The backdrop is as beautiful as the Caribbean. When I arrived at the hotel, the baggage carrier said, "Here is a beautiful view of the Atlantic Ocean." I said, I'm very familiar with the Atlantic Ocean but from the other side. In my mind's eye, I saw Wrightsville Beach beckoning over the horizon—two sides of the same beautiful coin. God's

## Thoughts on Mama Africa

As part of the package of our week-long activities in Senegal, we traveled to Goree Island to see where slaves were held prior to the long voyage of the Middle Passage. I wasn't sure how I was going to react. The organizer of the event told me that she herself would not participate in the tour because "they lie too much!" So, I was particularly curious to listen and learn what they had to say. The boat ride was not a particularly long journey from the dock in Senegal; but, I could surely see how it would be difficult to swim that distance if

## Poetically Speaking: Coincide

Well after my second trip to West Africa, I was pretty tired and ready to come home. Before leaving, I took a long, hot bath in the [Terrou-Bi Hotel](#) and listened to music. One of my favorite online stations played the classics (African-American style), so I vibed for a while. It reminded me of home, family and love. During my mental escape, I thought of how intense life has become. I thought of where God has placed me, and the mental, physical and spiritual stamina required to serve with excellence, honor and integrity. I thought of my weaknesses....



## Vegetarian Fare: West African Style

While most West African dishes pride themselves on their preparation of meat, this meal was prepared by someone who has enormous pride in their craft. It's sautéed vegetables, fettucine in olive oil and pesto, and fried ripe bananas. The venue: L'Endroit. I recommend it. Their speciality is their fish. A small plate would be considered large.

creation is truly magnificent! In my last missive, I noted that I would start work on March 26<sup>th</sup> and of May 23<sup>rd</sup>, I would have spent about 4 weeks here in West Africa. From April 9-20<sup>th</sup>, I traveled to Senegal, Guinea and Mauritania. For my current two-week stint, I'm working exclusively in Dakar, Senegal. I've never worked so hard at a job in my life! And for me, that's saying A LOT!! I'm truly grateful that I had so much downtime to spend with my husband prior to taking this job. As always, God knows what She's doing! 😊 It's the hardest job I've ever had. But, I'm up for the challenge and therefore am working like I intend to succeed.

For salon calls, I have a text message which directs callers to the number of one of our stylists. As for me personally, I'm not taking any new clients right now. I have my regulars and that will be how we roll for the time being. They schedule around my schedule and so it seems to be working. We give thanks.

I must confess that I have not become a great fan of West African cuisine. That's largely due to the fact that vegetarians are practically unheard of out here! As an example, I went to a restaurant with a colleague—a brother from B'more whose also a pastor and a home inspector. (I saw a kindred hustler spirit in him and said as much. He noted "Did I say that me and my wife have six kids?!" We both laughed). We were decompressing from our visit to Goree Island (See article titled Thoughts on Mama Africa), West Africa in general and our week-long activities with project implementers from around the world. (*Note: In the global health arena, programmatic people are mostly of European extraction or are African. There are few African-Americans. In my organization, I am the only one in my position. So, FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION! And yes, the last person in my position was fired by my Black supervisor—a French woman. And our President is an African man. Y'all the world is changing!*) So anyway, brother and I were decompressing after the week's activities as we were the only African-Americans in a group of 60-70 people.) He had tried a restaurant close to the hotel on the first night, so we walked over. The waitress came to take our order and I took several minutes explaining the peculiarities of my diet. *No, I don't eat white rice, only brown. No, I don't eat fish. No, vegetarian means no chicken, etc.* So, when the process was complete, I had ordered an omelet with grilled vegetables and fried plantains. The photo above is how another restaurant hooked up my dietary constraints. Not bad! And it tasted even better!! My colleague ordered chicken and rice. When the food came, it was simply food. No great effort was made with presentation, but I was hungry. Who cares. I dove in and started eating. We were perched on a deck that overlooked the ocean and luckily there was still sufficient light outside. Because as I lifted my fork to take another bite of the omelet, I saw something brown on the end of my fork. I pulled it off and noticed that it was grainy like muscle. I then lifted my omelet to see a lovely layer of chicken underneath the omelet! Voila! Brother looked at me with some degree of incredulity. I then lifted the omelet off of the bed of chicken, pushed it aside and continued eating. He said after all of that explanation, the message obviously did not transfer from the waitress to the cook. And seeing as this is not the US, I'm not going to send it back. I don't think that would be culturally appropriate. So, the cats circling my feet had a wonderful treat after I was done eating. But, one of the project directors that I work closely with explained to me, "In West Africa, there is no meal without meat! People won't understand what you eat." So, I understood it. I guess the cook must have tried to hide the chicken under the omelet with the best intention of ensuring that I had some degree of sustenance that was consistent with the West African dietary expectations as well as the fee I was paying for the meal. As it's Ramadan and it was just after sunset, I think I should have said, "I'm not eating meat for Ramadan. Please no meat." I know that mistake would not have been made. 😊 You live and learn. I know better. And so, I travel with my own almond and cashew trail mix. I don't go without protein. I just creatively make sure that I take care of my own needs.

From my travels, I'm concluding that Wakanda is real! It is not so much a place, it's a spirit—a way of being. I have attended high level meetings with Ministry officials, politicians, program managers, etc. When we went around the room to introduce ourselves, there were so many doctors in the room that I was shocked. Even an old man with gray hair and the most unassuming demeanor would stand and introduce himself as Dr. XXX—Head of some aspect of Public Health



service. Another woman who introduced herself to me as Assa had mischief in her eyes and spent some time talking with me. Language is a challenge because my professional vocabulary is much more advanced than my daily vocabulary. So, we muddled through. She was covered head to toe and was small in stature. I learned that she was 60 years old. She was a character who was the comic relief during the meetings. Some seemed to take her less seriously than others. When we went to our next meeting and she introduced herself as Dr. Assa XXX, head of an African health organization, I suddenly realized how living in America has given me prejudicial eyes that I would use to judge a book by its cover. During my current visit, I traveled on the plane and was seated next to two people who I engaged in conversation. The gentleman was in his 70s, the woman in her 50s. As we were descending into Senegal, we exchanged cards. I learned that the gentleman, Brother Joomaay was friends with Stokely Carmichael and is a professor at Princeton. And the woman was a doctor/professor in charge of bacteriology/virology laboratory services at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop. In meetings with government officials, I saw Americans and Europeans treating West African people with deference and respect. I thought: Is this what it means to have your own country—your own place in the world where no one can charge you with trying to take what is “rightfully” theirs? I pondered this thought with the full knowledge that to be poor is to be a man without country or place. Because the poor are outcasts wherever they live and breathe. And yet, the local fisherman has a dignity that comes with his profession and the freedom which it affords him is not one that he would exchange for money or status.

While visiting Mauritania, we met with the US Ambassador and were hosted as guests at a reception by the Deputy Ambassador—an African-American. His living room felt like a palace. We all looked at the columns and the ceiling carvings with awe. I thought: *To be American is truly something in this world. To be an American foreign dignitary like an Ambassador or Deputy Ambassador is to be a king.* I always knew this in my heart of hearts. But to walk into this man's state-appointed home helped me understand this knowledge better than simply thinking about it. America is the Rome of modern times. And the nation works very hard to maintain the image of supremacy. I felt the power of this imagery sitting in this man's home, and I'm American. While at the reception, I met a gentleman who looked like many West Africans, tall, very Black, thin. He had on a suit. We began to engage in conversation along with other Americans representing donors who fund our projects in the region. Someone asked the gentleman: What do you do? He said: “I'm in oil production.” And being of American extraction, one member of the group needed clarification. He explained, “Yes, I mine oil along the coast. We have only just begun to scratch the surface of African oil reserves. Ghana is way ahead of us; but, that society has been transformed by oil production. We are just beginning and have reserves throughout West African to tap into.” A colleague then stated: “Is that why I saw a group of men looking very much like Texans at the airport recently?” He said, “Oh yes. We work very closely with the Texans.” Later that evening, one American colleague asked another: “Did that gentleman work at the oil company or...” The other American colleague responded: “I got the very distinct impression that he was an owner.” I said, “So did I.” I then reflected on the fact that the dirt in Guinea is as red as the clay in Mandeville, Jamaica—my husband's hometown. That means they're sitting on an Aluminum mine because the soil is rich with Bauxite. Africa has not begun to tap into its mineral resources. My 9<sup>th</sup> grade World Cultures teacher taught us that almost 40 years ago, and I see it is still true today. It's just so sad that we have to destroy the Earth to release the magic. Prayerfully, we'll find a better way. There seems to be hope. Last week while flying back to Senegal from Raleigh, I met a millennial who had just moved to Raleigh with her company. She spoke about life in New York and how she paid \$3,900/month in rent just so she could have a door of separation in her studio apartment. So, I asked her where she was from originally. She told me her dad worked for the secret service so she's lived everywhere. But that her family is originally from Alabama. So, I said, “So is mine. My Dad's people live in BayMinette.” She knew exactly where it was, which is unusual because it's so small. But, it's outside of Mobile. She said, “My family is from Mobile.” Not missing a beat, I said, “We're probably cousins!” She had blond hair and blue eyes and was rather gregarious. I think I surprised her with that statement, but I intended to. She then told me she was on her way to Switzerland and that she would be stationed there for about 6 months. She works for a company involved in solar and wind energy. She said her company transfers staff regularly as a policy but that she would be returning to North Carolina. I thought of all of the solar farms that I've started to see popping up where trees used to be. Solar energy is good; deforestation is not. And I thought: God help us to find the right way.

Wakanda is real and Africans are educated, poised and ready to lead the next phase of human development. All they lack is organization and single-mindedness. That's why brother Joomaay will live his entire life in service to the unification of African peoples through the creation of the United States of Africa. I assure you that if such a nation exists, it will be on par with China and India in population, and no one could ever replicate the Atlantic Slave Trade again.



West African Attire

(Thoughts on Mama Africa cont'd...) attempting an escape. Overall, I won't speak much about Goree Island itself. I was not much impressed with or by it. It was a dated prison and I felt no need to aggrandize or celebrate the place. In fact, I think it should be destroyed and rebuilt with only a small plaque to remind the world of the evils that occurred here. Why should this beautiful island be preserved in perpetuity as prison cells because a few warped and greedy spirited sub-human minds decided to make this place into what it is? Why pay homage to their warped vision? I say refashion it into something beautiful that people can enjoy and which is worthy of the island's natural beauty; because as it is now, the



Goree Island, Senegal

beauty is suppressed and there is little on the island to enjoy. My parting thoughts about the place was that I felt blessed to be a descendant of a people who survived such as this and continue to rise despite the social shackles which continue to tie and bind us. All the same, the tour guide for the "House of Slaves" explained that millions of slaves came through the house before being sent to the New World. Wikipedia notes that historians find no evidence to suggest that the volume of slaves that UNESCO supports were in fact transported

through Goree. These historians believe that the facility was primarily for domestic slaves. I don't believe that. The architectural design of the place speaks for itself. I stood in the "door of no return" and I stood inside the prison cells. You don't keep people in prison cells for all of their natural lives solely as workers to develop a small island. And why maintain separate quarters for women, men and children? Why have quarters for "recalcitrant slaves?" In fact, why be situated on an island at all? I would argue that the presence of the island gave the Europeans settlers a strategic point from which to see ships coming from Europe to collect slaves and to see boats coming from the mainland trying to reclaim their relatives. It was a fort, and you would need to have a fort to protect your spoils if you're in someone else's territory and up to no good. I lived on Fort Monroe, Virginia for 5 years of my life and I know what a fort is when I see it. Why would you need a fort to accommodate the needs of simple domestic slave exploitation? I think the historians who have seen Goree as solely for domestic slave holdings are blind and see only what they want to see. I would argue that they are likely trying to protect the name and reputation of some European noble who lived on this place. As for my colleague's statement that they lie, I would imagine the atrocities that African-Americans know and understand to be the slave trade as a matter of course would sound incredulous to virgin ears. From my travels to West African, I have come to realize that many Africans are largely ignorant to the realities of the African-American experience. They know vaguely what happened here. But, I think a vast majority see us only as Black people who have had the opportunity to be in America and have taken little advantage of it. This is the same thing my husband thought of African-Americans and HIS ANCESTORS WERE SLAVES!! The reality however is that Black Jamaicans were always in the majority and therefore gained a significant spiritual and economic advantage when emancipation and independence finally came to that island community. When it occurred to me that West Africans do not teach slave history in a more honest and strategic way, I felt sad. Because we know that where the abuses of history are forgotten, they can be repeated.

You cannot understand Goree without understanding the greed, the insensitivity and the social class structure that got us there. When I traveled with a group of Africans and asked the name of our driver at the end of the week's long activities, no one in our group knew his name. I was shocked. I did not ask his name myself but I greeted him every day I got on the bus. I didn't engage beyond this because as a woman in a Muslim society, I kept my exchanges with men to a minimum. But when the African men who commissioned his services and organized our logistics did not know his name, I felt deeply for Mama Africa. In my soul, I knew that would never happen among African-Americans. I wanted to understand how this could possibly happen and why. I quickly discerned that every African in our group is very highly educated, very well paid and generally above average. This man was basically a laborer though his driving skills elevated a few notches in social status. But if a Black man is driving the bus in America,

someone's going to know his name after a few short encounters. But after a full week of him serving our group, it was frankly inappropriate to me. So, I made it my aim to learn his name and to re-establish his dignity as I believed it had been stolen from him, though in very subtle, class conscious ways. I won't say what I did or how because it was only in the most subtle and natural of ways, and it would make this missive too long. But, I can tell you that on the last day of our trip as we were all leaving our hosts home following an evening of festivities, this man came up to me to explain that he was going for the bus and to please wait inside for him. The evening was very cold and I for one was relieved that we would not have to walk to where the bus was parked. I nodded my head and he bolted through the door hurrying to get the bus with all urgency. The fact that he spoke only to me and not the organizers of our group, and the speed at which he moved



View from the Door of No Return

to acquire the bus, told me “mission accomplished.” On another occasion while visiting a health clinic, our group of dignitaries was received by the clinic staff. A young, pregnant woman was receiving pre-natal counseling when we arrived. She patiently waited, and when her cell phone went off, I saw the midwife give her the “evil eye.” I thought, “We have intruded on her time, yet she’s being chastised because she’s young and poor, and we are “more important” than she is. Afterwards, I patted her on her back and thanked her for her patience in allowing us to learn at her expense. Social inequality is a mask for evil in ways that many refuse to acknowledge or even conceptualize, because we fear that it means having to lose something. But, class status brings hubris and vanity, and ultimately, we forget that God is the giver of all things. Instead, we believe that we had something to do with this great fortune. Many “MeToo” victims are only too aware that “the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.” If your own vanity is the means of your demise, then all the more poetic. Yes, social inequality is a reality; but, it doesn’t mean it’s how God intended things to be.

After two separate excursions to West Africa, what has struck me most is this: 1) The populations of Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda combined are 300 million—equivalent to the population of the United States. These are only four of the 54 nations of Africa. There are over 1 billion people on the continent of Africa. If you couple with African nations the population of Blacks within the African Diaspora, it becomes apparent that Black people should never think of ourselves as a minority. And despite this unity in numbers, our ethnic differences are what disallow our strategic and unified advancement. 2) All of the terrain in Africa that I have seen to date is rather arid and void of lush, green vegetation. That was a disappointment to me personally as I LOVE TREES! I think God placed me in North Carolina for a reason. I kept trying to understand why there were so few trees, as the land in many ways reminded me of Haiti. But, Haiti is in the tropics, and I was primarily visiting the Sahel. So targeted deforestation was not likely the easy answer here. But, I observed the soil everywhere I went and the sandy loam was omnipresent except for in Guinea. Through my overhead views from the plane, and aerial maps, I became convinced that the Sahara Desert is growing; because, I thought it was primarily the northern African countries that had these dry, arid conditions. Yes, the climate is temperate but the arid conditions seem to be a harbinger of things to come should global warming continue unabated. 3) I am as much an American as I am an African. My DNA says one thing; my culture says something else. During my first trip to West Africa, I was the only African-American in the group. I moved freely between the distinct groups of European-Americans and Africans. I had personal, insider discussions with both groups that assured me that I was welcomed by both. But when Africans switched to Wolof or Arabic to explain a cultural nuisance that couldn’t be properly conveyed in French, I was an outsider. And when I discussed race relations in America with my compatriots, we were clearly on different sides of the battle line though they empathized with where I stand. On my second excursion, there were two of us; so, we naturally made a cultural connection which was helpful in processing our unique perspective among a group of diverse nationals who all naturally clung to each other out of comfort and convenience. And so, I reflected on who I am, from where my people have come and why God has bothered to place me here rather than there, or anywhere else on the planet for that matter. It’s not a question for which I will ever have an answer. But, I’m grateful for the opportunity to see the world, to understand the depth of the struggles, and to prayerfully work for the betterment of humanity in whatever way possible.

**Poetically Speaking (Cont’d..)** And then I closed my computer and went to bed. I’m back States-side now though fighting a cold. I arrived home on Thursday and felt great. Within three hours, I had a sore throat and felt the body aches coming. My sister advised me to take Airborne or Emergence-C, as I likely contracted a virus on the plane ride back. So, I asked my husband to drive me as I felt too weak to even do that. Fifteen hours closed up on a plane definitely leaves you susceptible to illnesses that others on the plane may have. I also have been pulling really long hours to keep up with day-time, field activities and night-time email assignments. My supervisor has assured me that things will get easier. But, God already showed me that it would be very hard at the outset. *Before starting the job, I dreamt of riding a bicycle up a steep hill with a baby on my back. I had to stand up to match the force needed to propel me forward. The amount of effort applied was significant! Then, I reached the top of the hill. From there the road was a gradual decline, so I rode downhill with minimal effort and I placed the baby in front of me. I held the baby with my left hand and moved obstacles in front of me with my right. In my dreams, a baby typically means a new project. The rest speaks for itself.* So, I’m not surprised by the amount of effort, or even remotely concerned. But, it does mean that baths are even more important to me than ever before. When I work, I’m fully engaged.

Well as I walked through the aisles of CVS looking for the Emergence-C, I suddenly noticed music playing overhead. I tuned my attention and heard the same beautiful classic that I had heard just prior to closing my computer in Senegal during my luxurious bath. I thought, what if I had arrived five minutes later or ten minutes earlier? Out of all of the songs in the African-American repertoire, why was this song playing at this time? I thought of home, family and love all over again, and I felt thankful that I had safely arrived. Moments like this remind me that I am (and we all) are fully in God’s matrix. Resistance is futile. Better to go with the flow, and feel the love when it comes as unexplained gnomes that suddenly appear in your garden. By Saturday, I heard a comedian reference another soulful classic while at the Goodnight’s Comedy Club waiting for the main event: DL Hughley. I then came home, began watching a movie, and heard a third. Each time, I smiled. These songs would have meant absolutely nothing to anyone else. But hearing these classics upon my return home, and knowing how they sustained me while so intensively engaged in work, I felt it was no coincidence. Rather, the universe coincided with my heart and said, “Welcome home.” I believe God sends us little clues that we’re doing precisely what has been ordained for our lives, that (S)he loves us, and that we are not alone. Music is the one of the primary social media that has been chosen for me. It seems to flow my soul’s DNA, so I am thankful. Amen.