

Photography — Yagazie Emezi

Enter: the new daughters of Africa

With the release of New Daughters of Africa, editor Margaret Busby explains why the collection – 25 years after Daughters of Africa was published – could not have come at a better time and introduces three stories from the anthology.

What a joy to be introducing you to *New Daughters of Africa*. Enabling the anthology to be assembled in record time, writers not only came on board with enthusiasm and alacrity but often steered me in the direction of others whose work they admire. Altogether, more than 200 living writers have contributed work to *New Daughters of Africa* – an amazing party guest list!

A template of sorts was provided by the anthology I compiled more than 25 years ago, *Daughters of Africa*; yet the new volume represents a fresh start, since it duplicates none of the writers who appeared in the 1992 collection.

Custom, tradition, friendships, mentor/mentee relationships, sisterhood, romance, inspiration, encouragement, sexuality, intersectional feminism, the politics of gender, race and identity – the anthology explores an extensive spectrum of possibilities, in ways that are touching, surprising, angry, considered, joyful, heartrending. Supposedly taboo subjects are addressed head-on and with subtlety, familiar dilemmas elicit new takes.

Countries represented range from Australia to the Bahamas, Cameroon to Dominica, Egypt to Ethiopia, Finland to Ghana, Haiti to Côte D'Ivoire, Jamaica to

Kenya, Nigeria to Norway and Sudan to Zimbabwe.

My ambition was and is to shine a light on as many as possible of the deserving, whether or not they are acknowledged or lauded by the gatekeepers, who traditionally single out a privileged few, seemingly never too many to rock the boat. But the boat is going nowhere if it is content to drift in stagnating water.

In my introduction to the 1992 anthology, I concluded that: 'Throughout these women's words runs the awareness of connectedness to a wider flow of history, to the precursors, our foremothers. Our collective strength, like that of a chain, derives from maintaining the links.'

I feel undeterred in my proselytizing for greater visibility for women writers of African descent, which until relatively recently I had thought that I began doing towards the end of the 1980s, when I began to work on compiling *Daughters of Africa*. However, I recently happened on a letter from Wole Soyinka (who in 1986 made us all proud by becoming the first African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature). In 1975, while he was editor of *Transition* magazine, he wrote me a letter responding to something I had said when our paths had crossed in London and I had seemingly berated him for not including enough women in

an anthology he had recently curated. His warm response read, in part: 'It goes to show – the proportion of women poets never did occur to me – a greater testimony to my non-sexist outlook I cannot imagine! But seriously though, it's quite true, and I am sure you wouldn't have wanted double standards applied in selection. But you are right to point it out. I know that in the next edition I will especially search for poetry by women.'

For my part, I present every woman who did me the honour of accepting my invitation to feature in this anthology with the Venerable Order of True African Sisterhood. A legacy of *New Daughters of Africa* that has been facilitated by their generosity is a major new award that will directly benefit African women, making possible a course of study free of the worry of fees and accommodation costs.

And may all who find their way to this anthology, regardless of gender, class or race, feast well on its banquet of words. ●

MARGARET BUSBY IS A MAJOR CULTURAL FIGURE IN THE UK AND AROUND THE WORLD. BORN IN GHANA AND EDUCATED IN THE UK, SHE BECAME BRITAIN'S YOUNGEST AND FIRST BLACK WOMAN PUBLISHER WHEN SHE CO-FOUNDED ALLISON & BUSBY IN THE LATE 1960S. SHE HAS JUDGED NUMEROUS NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LITERARY COMPETITIONS, AND SERVED ON THE BOARDS OF SUCH ORGANIZATIONS AS THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND, WASAFIRI MAGAZINE AND THE AFRICA CENTRE.



From dirt

Words — Camillet Dungy

For months now, I've been living through the grief of deaths, devastation and debilitating disease. I am naming none of these things in an abstract, global sense, though they are pervasive conditions of our times. I am talking about the deaths of family, the failure of this country [the US] to provide safety to dear friends. I am talking about grief and exhaustion and autoimmune flares that make it difficult, daily, to get out of bed. I'm talking about seeming to run out of prospects. But, this week, we pulled several cubic feet of rock from our yard. Now the soil is ready to receive pole beans a friend gifted me last summer, beans from a line of seed passed on by survivors since the 1838 Trail of Tears. Soon, I will make a space in my garden for something that will look, by autumn, like edible hope.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Working the land, I am always losing track of a linear concept of time. What happens today is fed by what I did yesterday. What I reap in the fall will recollect decisions made by the likes of Dr John Wyche – the man who began to send out these

heirloom Cherokee seeds to whomever showed interest and sent postage – in a decade I was nearly too small to remember and which my daughter calls the olden days.

If we were to start from the start, where would that take us? Black-eyed peas, a staple food in West Africa, made the journey with enslaved people from that continent into the American south. In their book, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*, scholars Judith Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff tell us that these same people used the stimulating kola nut to manage the fetid water they were given on slavers' ships. Later, that nut would make a key ingredient for Coca-Cola. When I speak about garden-variety crops in this country, I nearly always point toward simultaneous legacies of trauma and triumph. Watermelon, sorghum, millet, sesame seed, rice: none of these would be what they are in America were it not for the centuries of human trafficking we call the slave trade. The stories I've received tell me some ancestor must have kept seed for okra in her hair through the

long trial of the Middle Passage and onto, then *into*, American soil. She must have secured raw peanuts in an unsearched scrap of cloth she kept near her body. Peanuts, like pole beans, like black-eyed peas, are both food and seed. You can eat them for power today or plant them for abundance tomorrow. People who came long before us carried the source of a new kind of flourishing through desolation most of us care not to fully comprehend. If I say my garden's story starts with the planting of a seed, to which seed am I referring?

I remember the first garden I planted as a married woman. It wasn't much to speak of, neither the garden nor the house in whose yard it was sown. The garden was a way to help me feel rooted in a place where we were struggling to begin our new life. I planted a few, sturdy starts: marigolds and nasturtium. I put in zucchini, mostly for the riot of its bright blossoms. I kept an artichoke for the same reason. The thistle flower delighted me, though it attracted an army of ants that quickly moved the artichoke beyond the possibility of human consumption. ➤

I'm not sure I understand how it would be possible to talk about history without taking into account the environment out of which our history springs

Even if I had managed to harvest anything during our brief season in that house, I shouldn't have trusted the food that dirt produced. Fumes from the nearby freeway drifted over us all night and all day. Anytime they were touched, flakes of paint flew from the Victorian duplex's exterior walls. Soil tests in the area have revealed lead levels hundreds of parts per million above what is deemed to be safe, and I hadn't built raised beds. Still, I wanted to witness a plan come into fruition. I planted seeds, I planted starts, I watered, and I weeded, and I watched. I could say that my efforts were futile, but I won't. There had been little but dirt in that yard before I started digging. For the few months we lived in that house, we got to walk outside each day and appreciate a kind of flowering.

Not too long ago, I shared a few hours with a Salvadoran poet who walked across the desert into the US when he was nine years old. There is a great deal of hardship in his story. The landscapes he's walked across have delivered incredible pain. And yet, as we talked about the importance of writers of colour celebrating the living world, he found himself recalling his grandmother's garden. There was joy there, he insisted. He wouldn't let his charge to document suffering stop him from recalling this pleasure.

There is sustaining power to be generated from claiming even complicated beauty as a peace we are entitled to enjoy.

Once, as I dug in dirt contaminated with legacy pollutants, a local nursery's discounted flowers in their black plastic pots nearby, a woman from the neighbourhood stopped to watch me. Why would I bother to tend such a yard, she wanted to know. I remember feeling angry that she didn't believe our block, our rented house, deserved such a demonstration of care. I know it might take a lot of work, I told her, but I want to grow something beautiful.

On the property of Thomas Jefferson's retreat home, Poplar Forest, archeologists have discovered caches of food that give insight into the diet of the enslaved men and women who lived on that property. The very produce of the earth has provided a lasting record of who on that land had what type of access, autonomy and power. The list of foods found in the storage pits reveals the epidemic of deprivation endemic to the institution of slavery – but it also reveals the strategies of a people insistent on nourishing themselves.

Archeological studies suggest that the people at Poplar Forest grew corn in their gardens. They probably grew sunflowers, mint, sweet potatoes and violets. They might have grown the violets and sunflowers as ornamentals, but just as likely, they were using them for food. The violets could be a kind of replacement for okra and greens. Even the ornamental plants around the quarters were provisions the people who tended the land could eat. I like to think that the people appreciated looking at these plants as much as they appreciated knowing they could depend on them for physical sustenance when the need arose. Archeologists have found the remains of wheat, oats, rye, sumac, blackberry, purslane, pigweed, poppies and more. The people raised chickens, whose eggs they could sell, which they also might have done with some of the other produce from their gardens. But Jefferson made sure his son-in-law 'put an end to the cultivation of tobacco' by the people he called property, who were growing it in their gardens. There was no other way of drawing a line between what is theirs and mine, Jefferson admitted in a letter, than to forbid these men and women from growing for personal use the same crops they cultivated in his fields. Don't think I don't have histories like this in mind when I insist on growing what I please in the soil that surrounds

me. There is power to be generated from cultivating whatever might sustain me, in whatever way I wish.

I grow sunflowers and sweet potatoes in my own garden. I plant what plants I desire, and I harvest or not as I choose. I grow mint and tolerate the purslane people these days tend to weed. As we learn in Lucille Clifton's poem 'mulberry fields', sometimes unmastered growth reveals what it is our land most dearly needs. I grow poppies and let the wild violets flourish, for, through their flowering, time will progress.

It's been nearly a decade since I dug in the particular patch of dirt our neighbour questioned, but I still regularly encounter incredulity when I talk about coaxing beauty out of the legacy pollutants that haunt us every day. Not too long ago, a woman asked me how I could fancy myself an environmental writer when I write so much about African American history.

For a breath or two, I was speechless. I'm not sure I understand how it would be possible to talk about history without taking into account the environment out of which our history springs.

Living in the body I live in, I can't help but see the direct implications, the devastating implications, of the erasure of certain histories. When you dismiss lives from the record, you put those lives in jeopardy. There is a reason that freeways were so frequently run through one part of town (the black part of town) and not others. The reason is because the lives and the property of those who lived in that part of town were not valued as highly as others. The pollution of that indifference persists in the very ground people walk on today. Writing about the environment is a necessary political decision, just as finding a way to beautify the patch of dirt we called home was a necessity in that first house my husband and I shared. It is also why, once the ants announced their interest in the artichoke, I let them enjoy its substance while I settled for appreciating its splendour. I was not dependent on that artichoke for its nutritional value, and if my point is to see to it that things around me thrive, sharing with ants could be part of this goal. I refuse to take ↻



part in the segregation of the imagination that assigns greater value to some experiences than it assigns to others. If there is to be a flourishing that I can cultivate, I want its reach to be wide.

In our current yard, near where I'll grow the Cherokee Trail of Tears pole beans, there is some rhubarb that has greeted me each spring since we moved into this house. Rhubarb is a tricky plant, scorned by many but by others fiercely loved. The nontoxic stems of the plant are fibrous and nutritious, containing useful medicinal characteristics. For our contemporary taste, these stems are bitter. We typically add quite a bit of sugar to help the medicine go down, converting what might be considered a vegetable into something we use in simple syrups, cakes, and pies. Who were the people who put in this rhubarb? There is nothing else like it in the yard. The

people who lived here before us poured river rock over most of the other patches that might have made a garden. But the rhubarb, in its three-square-foot bed, comes back each year to remind me of something. What? Where there appears to be only dirt, there may be the root system of some kind of insistent thriving.

I never know how much I need to see that rhubarb unfurling until it begins to unfurl. Rhubarb may lack the power to cure what truly ails this world, but, I am thankful, it brings me back to the recognition of wonder and of beauty; and that is not a gift to be dismissed. This year, for the first time, the rhubarb burst into flower. The many-headed bracts look like 10,000 snowflakes held firm on summer branches. I am supposed to lop off the flower heads to encourage the edible stalks to keep growing. They'll go dormant sooner if I leave these bold

bids for pollination, and the plant will be of no practical use to me. But these enormous flowers are so lovely. I find it practical, as a matter of survival, to seek evidence of the wild wonder of the world. In this summer's full blooming, it's as if the joy I glean in this garden has erupted over every inch of my life. ●

BORN IN DENVER, COLORADO, **CAMILLE T DUNGY** IS THE AUTHOR OF FOUR COLLECTIONS OF POETRY, MOST RECENTLY *TROPIC CASCADE* (2017), AND THE ESSAY COLLECTION *GUIDEBOOK TO RELATIVE STRANGERS: JOURNEYS INTO RACE, MOTHERHOOD AND HISTORY* (2017), A FINALIST FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD. SHE HAS ALSO EDITED ANTHOLOGIES, INCLUDING *BLACK NATURE: FOUR CENTURIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN NATURE POETRY* (2009). HER HONOURS INCLUDE NEA FELLOWSHIPS IN BOTH POETRY AND PROSE, AN AMERICAN BOOK AWARD, TWO NORTHERN CALIFORNIA BOOK AWARDS, AND TWO NAACP IMAGE AWARD NOMINATIONS. SHE IS A PROFESSOR AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY. 'FROM DIRT' WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN *EMERGENCE* MAGAZINE.

Home

Words — Ketty Nivyabandi

Once lived in a yellow little house. Each morning, birds convened and sang at my bedroom window. The gate was indigo and inside the garden all kinds of flowers rose to kiss the sunny walls. The yellow nest was filled with cherished books, colourful art and sweet peace.

There was a little kitchen, with cherry-red cabinets made by the most business-savvy street artisan I have ever met. In the little kitchen, my daughters and I baked, giggled, danced and let our free-range souls be. Looking down on us was a Gael Faye poster, cooking books from across the globe (including delicious Caribbean recipes by Maya Angelou), my daughters' early drawings, vintage photographs. And music.

Always music.

On the yellow porch sat a white high

table where I would often pretend to write. Most of the time I simply soaked in the silence. And beside it, a long lounge chair, always tilted in the same, exact position: the only place in the house where one could spot the glistening, silvery Lake Tanganyika. Between the neighbour's blue tin roof and two tall mango trees. On some mornings, after the skies had cried all night, I would witness the mighty mountains of Congo rise from the fog. And everything inside me would fall into place.

It is where I enjoyed the most joyful evenings with rowdy, tipsy relatives who sometimes popped in with red wine, some cheese and impromptu dance moves. It's also where I often lay alone, by candlelight, and let my heart breathe. Just above me hung a chalkboard, where my daughter once wrote: 'Welcome

home, where the sun is always free.'

It was home, in every sense of the word.

Where one softens.

Where one belongs.

It was home until one sudden morning, when danger came banging at the indigo gate. Prompted me to drop the book in my hand, grab the closest bag and lock up the sunny nest. 'It's just for a couple of days,' I thought. A couple of days later, danger spat me out of my city, out of the hills, out of the lake, out of the drums, out of the homeland I adore. Danger chased as I drove at the highest speed, through the coiled bowels of my beloved land, running away from the only place I had ever wanted to be. Running away from the yellow, the indigo, the cherry red, the morning birds, the splendid silvery lake, the scent

of rain, the loud relatives, the red wine and impromptu dance moves, the sweet peace, the emerald hills, the sound of my daughters laughing in between two nap dreams, the escapades to my aunt's rural home, the smell of cow dung, of eucalyptus leaves, of freedom, the taste of isombe, the sight of bougainvillea on every street, the sound of church bells on Sundays and the *muezzin* at dawn, the scent of Arabica coffee beans, the voices of dear friends, the red soil, the green, the green, the green...

It was home until I crossed the border, looked back at the green sliding into red, and felt everything inside me falling apart.

'Thank God you are safe,' they tell you. Not knowing that your heart was never more at risk, never more a wound, never more famished.

'You are so lucky you got out. Now you can rebuild your life.' And you want to say that you don't want to rebuild, not here, not in this concrete greyness which leaves you out of breath. Not in these superstore alleys where bananas exude sadness, and remind you of the haunting look in the old lion's eyes, at the city zoo. The look of the displaced.

Not in this place where bananas refuse to grow, where parenting involves a strategic plan, where time is an investment, where couples debate what to have for dinner like a constitutional reform. Where a crowded commute ride screams with loneliness.

'You'll see, it will be great for the children.' And you want to tell them that what is good for your children is napping with the scent of the rain falling on dusty ground, running barefoot in the grass with 10 cousins, the taste of small and sweet bananas (how does one explain this?), the sun teasing the melanin in their skins, and the tender love and care they receive everywhere they go...

But you remain quiet, because there are no words to explain these mutterings in your veins. Because you should be grateful for being alive, even when your whole life burns. Because there is a certain indecency in not being grateful. In not acknowledging your fortune,

the misery and fear of those who stayed behind, the kindness of your host country. Because you must, after all, reinvent (not rebuild, please, no) your life. Because your surroundings should not determine the state of your heart. Of course not.

And so you carry on, in a refugee camp, fetching wood with strangers who soon become your world, rising early to beat the maize distribution line, cutting deals to feed your babies, looking at this country within a country, not knowing when you will ever get out. Or in the homeless shelter, receiving food stamps, and explanations of how to proceed being given as if you were a five-year-old and wherever you came from requires things to be explained s.l.o.w.l.y.

You smile when kindness offers you used clothes and a cooking pan, you are overwhelmed by this warmth, these random acts of goodness but hold yourself from rupturing into a river. Because you are someone, you were someone, because you once had your own new clothes and plenty of cooking pans, thank you very much, and somehow this beautiful kindness also feels terribly unkind, unkind to your being, to your inside, to your life, and just makes you want to cry.

You overcome being called a refugee. A small, wounding word in which the world tries to squeeze you every day. As your vastness cries out.

You overcome the weight and inexplicable shame that comes with that word. The feeling of not belonging. As you desperately try to catch your dignity, flying away in the autumn wind.

You overcome becoming part of the diaspora, this warm, wide sea of people whom you now begin to resemble; always a little too distant, or too close to home. Never in balance. Almost like, but never quite 'home'.

You put one foot in front of the other, without thinking, forget thinking, forget any logic you ever had, because what kind of logic shatters a life into pieces in one single morning? You create normal out of the abnormal. For months, for years, until one day you surprise yourself laughing out loud. Find new blossoms in your heart. You learn to live with the scars of

exile. To conceal them. Especially from yourself. You learn to 'adapt'. And when you finally receive your immigration papers, your new friends, your lawyer, your colleagues at the store, all rejoice: 'All is well now!' As though a home, a country, a life could be replaced so easily, by paperwork.

You learn to oil the stretch marks that criss-cross your heart, to walk fast, not to smile to strangers, to do 10 things at once, 'to plan'. You learn not to hear the voids in this wealth, the heavy silence on the crowded morning commute, the wails in the teenager's menacing eyes, the unravelling in the soccer mom's high-pitched voice, the insecurity in the suited man's walk. You learn to wear dark colours in winter, and not to miss the happy, organized chaos that is your hometown. You learn to unlearn yourself. To unlearn the organic joy, the carefree in you. And not see the dangers of this place where everything has a limit. Where your being feels tamed. Where life feels like a trap, and you don't understand why because everything 'is well now'. You learn because the alternative is too painful. Because to remember—to truly remember—is to hurt, and your stretch-marked heart can only stretch so far.

I still hear the yellow nest and the emerald hills, calling my name every day. Sometimes, on a merciful night, the moon will rise just as it used to, under my porch. On such nights I close my eyes, and I am home. ●

A POET, HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVIST FROM BURUNDI, **KETTY NIVYABANDI** HAS HAD POEMS PUBLISHED IN SEVERAL ANTHOLOGIES WORLDWIDE. SHE IS AN OUTSPOKEN VOICE FOR JUSTICE IN HER COUNTRY, AND BECAME A REFUGEE IN 2015, AFTER SHE LED WOMEN'S PROTESTS IN HER CAPITAL CITY. SHE CURRENTLY LIVES IN CANADA. IN 2012 SHE WAS CHOSEN TO REPRESENT BURUNDI AT POETRY PARNASSUS, THE CULTURAL PROGRAMME ACCOMPANYING THE 2012 SUMMER OLYMPICS IN LONDON.

Saying goodbye to Mary Danquah

Words — Nana-Ama Danquah

It is not a balanced equation if all languages must come to English to mean something.
— Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Nana-Ama! my mother called out. 'Come meet one of your cousins.'

We were in Accra, at a family gathering — a wedding or funeral or naming ceremony, I can't say which; they all blur into what, essentially, seems like the same memory of delicious platters of food and an endless array of new kinfolk whose names and exact relationship to me I no longer even try to keep track of. Except this time. This time would be different. This introduction would leave me speechless.

I went and stood beside my mother. She placed a hand on my back, just below my right shoulder. 'Nana-Ama,' she said, almost giddily, 'this is Mary Danquah. And Mary, this is Nana-Ama.'

I was instantly confused, thrust into what felt like an alternate reality. I blinked slowly, allowing my lids to stay down for a moment or two longer than usual, then I looked at my 'new' cousin. For a moment, I half-expected to see my own face staring back.

'I'm sorry... um... did you... what... um... Mary Danquah?' I mumbled, unable to decide which of my many questions to ask first.

She nodded, said hello.

'That's my name, too,' I blurted, drowning in the awkwardness of the moment. Not once in my 40-something years had I ever met another Mary Danquah.

¶

In 1973, at the age of six, I emigrated to the US to be with my mother, who had been living there for three years, and my father, who had only recently arrived. One of the many changes that came with living in a new country was the

acquisition of a new name. Even though in private, and in the company of other Africans, my parents continued to call me Nana-Ama — my traditional, cultural name — when introducing me to anyone else, they used my Christian name, Mildred. I was not used to being called Mildred.

The practice of conferring Christian, or English, names on African children was introduced by missionaries from the Western world who came to what they considered the 'Dark Continent' for the purpose of religious indoctrination. In many cases, children were required to have Christian names in order to register and attend classes in the missionary-run schools. Usually that meant balancing an existence of duality — using one name when operating within the colonial system and using another when operating within one's native culture.

Mildred was as far removed from my reality as anything could be. I was being called a foreign name in a foreign country by foreign people. It was ill-fitting, and I wore it uncomfortably, resentfully, woefully. It was like sharing a body with a complete stranger. Mildred was an old white woman in Hampstead who enjoyed a proper fry-up — baked beans, tomatoes, blood pudding, triangles of heavily buttered toast — not a Ghanaian girl transplanted to Takoma Park, Maryland, who craved *aponkyenkrakra* with *fufu*.

Americans tend to be lazy-tongued, preferring brevity over all else, including beauty. They tend toward names that are familiar and monosyllabic: Sam instead of Samantha, Beth not Elizabeth, Hank for Henry, and Tim not Timothy. Many immigrants to America adopt English

names or Anglicize their own. Itzak is transformed to Isaac, Ekaterina to Kate. Chang Kong-Sang becomes Jackie Chan. I didn't want Nana-Ama to become anything else. I wanted to remain who I was, who I'd always been. That, unfortunately, wasn't a viable option.

The children I went to school with weren't just mean, they were hateful. They felt as certain of their superiority as Americans as they did of my supposed inferiority as an African. And they never let me forget it. I was teased mercilessly, called a monkey, an 'African booty-scratcher', asked if I had slept in trees back home, and told on a regular basis to 'go back to Africa'. Imagine if in the midst of all that, I'd asked my terrorizers to call me Nana-Ama!

¶

It never occurred to me that I could change my name until one of my classmates mentioned something about looking forward to marriage in adulthood in order to drop a surname she disliked. That's when the idea of finding a name to replace Mildred took hold and I began exploring possibilities for reinvention.

The lists I made were ordered alphabetically. Beginning with 'A', I jotted down names I thought acceptable, thought I could tolerate, perhaps even learn to like. I listened to their rhythms, the particular cadence people used when saying them. I turned each letter over and around in my mouth, letting my tongue glide over the smooth edges of its vowels. I tried to avoid names with sharp, hard consonants, and names that were an obvious magnet for bullies.

The first name I fell in love with was ➔



There was something about the way she said my name, with pride, with certainty, that made me suddenly feel weightless and free

Amanda. I heard it one day while watching television. A father, square-jawed and towering, had been teased by his daughter, a raven-haired girl with Shirley Temple-style curls. Afterwards, he said, 'Oh, Amanda,' through an exaggerated smile, then used his fingers to softly brush the girl's bangs from her forehead. There was such tenderness in that scene. We had an Amanda in our school whom everyone liked. She wasn't in my class, but during recess, when we were all outside, I watched the other kids speak to her, their voices carrying the sound of each syllable until it started turning into song.

I'd often pretend that those were scenes from *my* life, that the father in the programme was talking to *me*, gently patting *my* afro-puffs; that *my* imaginary circle of friends was singing *my* name in perfect harmony, as though we were in a musical. There were so many things about that name, Amanda, that reminded me of my own name, the one I'd quite unceremoniously been stripped of. Rhythmically, they are the same: *ah-MAN-dah* and *nah-NAH-mah*. They have the same three-syllable beat and, with the exception of 'd', all of the letters in Amanda are also in Nana-Ama. I think that's why I didn't, in the end, choose Amanda. I didn't want to be called a name that would forever remind me of my original name.

Next were the names that began with 'Z' which, perhaps because it's the last letter in the alphabet, seems to throw a shade of mystery onto everything in which it appears. It wasn't hard to envision myself as a Zelda, Zoe, Zora or even Zeva. Ah, but those names commanded attention; they were bold, the exact opposite of what I was convinced I needed: an ordinary name that would blend in, bring an end to the teasing and make the pain of being me – heavily accented me, dark-skinned black girl me, African me – miraculously disappear.

Eventually, I just returned to my own given names. You see, I had not just one but two Christian names. In addition to Mildred, there was also an English middle name: Mary.

The name felt too deeply rooted in religion for someone such as I, who has always entertained doubt. Nevertheless, I changed the spelling to Meri to make it uniquely my own. For years, that name served me well; it enabled me to move through American society without the additional scrutiny and xenophobia that comes with having a name

that's 'different', 'funny', 'difficult to pronounce', a name that announces one's origins.

Meri is a well-constructed persona, a person my circumstances forced me to become. Whereas I despised Mildred, I am rather fond of Meri, but she doesn't reflect the whole truth of who I am, the image I see in the mirror, or the internal voice I hear when I put pen to paper. Because of that, when I began my literary career I published as Meri Nana-Ama Danquah. A few times in my young adulthood, I had tried to do away with Meri altogether but was advised against it by editors, colleagues and friends. 'Nana-Ama is just too...' each one said, citing one or more of the reasons that had previously sent me running in the direction of Meri.

I don't know the meaning of Mary. It occurred to me while writing this essay to look it up, but I didn't because, frankly, I don't have a burning desire to know. I imagine there is a beautiful story to its origin, one that probably predates the Biblical anecdotes we know of the Madonna and of Magdalene. There's a story behind every name, a narrative much longer than the simple adjectives often given by way of translation, in which so much is often lost.

Tennessee Williams wrote that 'the name of a person you love is more than language'. As I grew older and less compromising in my love of self, I began to see each reason I had been given for needing an English name for the lie it was. How can Schwarzenegger be easier to pronounce than Nana-Ama? If Americans can learn the proper pronunciation of Liev, Bogosian and Sinead, then why not Nana-Ama? My name also has a significance that surpasses language. It holds its own power and makes its own magic. It ties me to a land, a history, a lineage.

Sometimes we look back on our lives and, despite the difficulties of our journey, despite the many times we faltered, it seems as though we were destined to be exactly where we have arrived. As an African writer, it feels strangely like a rite of passage, this decision to dispense with the use of an English name. Chinua Achebe was once Albert. Kofi Awoonor was once George. Ama Ata Aidoo was once Christina. Buchi Emecheta was once Florence. Now I, too, am my authentic self again.

Who best to define the parameters of your authenticity than you?

After I decided to drop Meri and use only Nana-Ama, the first person I told was my friend and mentor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. We were at lunch, speaking of Africa, specifically of dictatorships and the need for philosopher-kings.

'I don't think Meri is such a bad name,' he said with a shrug.

'I hear what you're saying, James,' I responded, not missing a beat. I had deliberately called him by the colonial name he was given at his baptism but had very publicly and emphatically rejected as a young writer. We both laughed, and when our eyes met I knew he understood.

Mary Danquah is round-faced and soft-spoken, with a presence that stands firmly in its space. We laughed, exchanged pleasantries, expressed shock about sharing the same name.

'I only borrowed it for a bit,' I teased.

Just before we said our farewell, I could feel the part of me that had, for so long, been Meri Danquah preparing to leave with her. My cousin and I embraced like two women who knew their meeting was kismet.

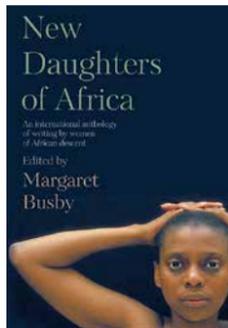
'Bye, Mary,' I said as she was walking away, her stride purposeful. She turned, waved.

'Bye, Nana-Ama.'

There was something about the way she said my name, with pride, with certainty, that made me suddenly feel weightless and free. ●

A NATIVE OF GHANA, **NANA-AMA DANQUAH** IS THE AUTHOR OF THE ACCLAIMED 1998 MEMOIR *WILLOW WEEP FOR ME: A BLACK WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH DEPRESSION*, AND THE EDITOR OF THE ANTHOLOGIES *BECOMING AMERICAN* (2000), *SHAKING THE TREE: A COLLECTION OF NEW FICTION AND MEMOIR BY BLACK WOMEN* (2003), AND *THE BLACK BODY* (2009). SHE HAS TAUGHT AND LECTURED AT MANY NOTABLE INSTITUTIONS, AMONG THEM THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA AND ANTIOCH COLLEGE, AND HAS WRITTEN FOR PUBLICATIONS INCLUDING THE *WASHINGTON POST*, THE *AFRICA REPORT* AND THE *LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS*. SHE DIVIDES HER TIME BETWEEN ACCRA, GHANA, AND THE COACHELLA VALLEY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

NEW DAUGHTERS OF AFRICA (£30.00, MYRIAD EDITIONS) IS OUT NOW AND AVAILABLE VIA ETHICALSHOP.ORG



NEW INTERNATIONALIST

CAPITAL AT RISK. INVESTMENTS ARE LONG TERM AND MAY NOT BE READILY REALISABLE. ABUNDANCE IS AUTHORISED AND REGULATED BY THE FINANCIAL CONDUCT AUTHORITY (525432).

add to your retirement pot

without driving climate change

a. abundance investment > make good money