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ENG 235

Dr. Stanley Galloway

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Cultural Review

Throughout our time in ENG 235: Literature of Southern Africa, we have had the opportunity to listen to several guest speakers talk about their writing and their experiences living in southern African countries. One of the speakers I found most interesting to listen to was Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, a poet who grew up in South Africa. Much of what de Villiers discusses in her poetry has to do with the improper treatment of women in southern Africa, which I found some resonance with, but also noticed that it says a lot about the treatment of women all over the world.

In our conversation with de Villiers, we discussed her poem “Hell in a handbag.” In the second stanza, the poem says: “Truth Number One: your body / is a temple” (l.6-7). These two lines were a large focus of our conversation with de Villiers. While the lines could have some biblical significance, as they are similar to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, de Villiers shared that “[her] mother was a complete atheist.” Although her mother “went to church as a child so she would obviously know” the biblical significance of the quote, “it wasn’t an intentional thing.” de Villiers just simply grew up with her mother saying that to her. It was meant as a reminder to her that “this is how you respect your body because your body is a temple for your soul.” However, this quote causes de Villiers anger, not at her mother “but at the system that puts pressure on women” because “there is no protection” for the body. Women are always being watched and there is currently virginity testing going on in South Africa, even though there is nothing that

physically changes for all women when that virginity is lost. In our conversation with de Villiers, Dr. Galloway made the connection that the virginity testing in South Africa is like apartheid, only "in a different color and a different plane."

In her career as a poet, de Villiers has been warned about releasing her poems to the public. She "was afraid of that […] but [she has] a lot of friends who are black feminists" and they encouraged her to release her poems because the problems of injustice towards women are not going away. "It's not like the poem is going to fix you" but it can offer guidance on how to navigate life after an injustice. According to de Villiers, "it becomes about taking responsibly for yourself but not blaming yourself, and learning to protect yourself." After all her life experiences, including rape and adoption, de Villiers has been able to peel back the layers and find the similarities and differences she has with other people. According to de Villiers, "we are all individuals, […] there is no one who isn't an individual, [and] it's about how we connect to the collective," which is the family and the community.

For de Villiers, poetry "is an opportunity to respond" to cultural occurrences, social injustices, and other life experiences. "Your own poem [is about] your own experience" and that does a lot in terms of personal healing, advocating for certain identity groups, or showing others that they are not alone in their experiences. Furthermore, de Villiers "also [believes] that people write poetry because no one has written what they want to say" or how they want to say it. The perspectives that de Villiers has about why people write poetry reminds me of George M. Johnson, a queer black author. Johnson recently visited Bridgewater College for an endowed lecture about their most recent book *All Boys Aren't Blue*. In their lecture, Johnson explained that they find their writing inspiration from author Toni Morrison, who once said: "If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." To Johnson, what

people share about their experiences can help other people speak about or navigate their own experiences. Literature can help people, especially young people, learn about themselves and their identities. de Villiers said: “This wound that you have, does it have to make you isolated, […] or is it your way to becoming like everyone else?” In a way, literature helps people not feel alone in their experiences, and allows them to find a sense of belonging in the world. Reading and studying literature can reveal the similar experiences embedded in cultures all over the world, and act as a connection to people of different lifestyles. Literature allows us to realize that we are not as different as we may seem or choose to believe.