

Treading the Atlantic

jason n. vasser-elong

Treading the Atlantic is an essay that details how the legacy of colonialism affects one's sense of self in the social context in which one lives. This account will enable the reader to see society through the lens of someone "Treading the Atlantic" as lived in real-world experiences of struggle, self-efficacy and spirituality. This merging of art and science aims to highlight the cognitive dissonance of those personally and historically affected by colonialism. The speaker in the essay is not interested in placing blame on any one person or people, but will inform the reader of day-to-day ponderings of those affected by colonialism.

Key terms: Colonialism; Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; Afro-Dutch identity; African-American identities; DNA.

I am and have been called many things in my life but for the sake of conversation, I have been a poet ever since my sixth grade English teacher, Mrs. Davis, introduced me to Paul Laurence Dunbar and his poem *A Negro Love Song*. I have used, and continue to use, poetry to interpret the world I live in as an African-American male, who was brought up in a nation of immigrants; poetry has been the meter by which I sought a sense of self. Having been born and raised in the Midwest of the United States, particularly St. Louis, Missouri, had its own set of regional challenges; implicit and explicit racism, prejudice and the colloquial "Where did you go to high school?" which allowed total strangers to pass judgment on your educational background and other socio-economic factors. I questioned everything as a child, and my ancestry was one of those elements about my life that I could not ignore; it consumed me because the society in which I lived reminded me every day that I was not only different, but that there was something wrong with my black skin, full lips and kinky hair. As African-Americans we are taught and reminded of our ancestral lineage to Africa and more specifically to slavery. For example, the textbooks I read in my formative years often mentioned that *slaves* were taken from Africa, when in fact they were *Africans*; they were not slaves in their own countries but forced to become so after their capture as free people. Despite the externally imposed label "African", many

of those people didn't know that "African" was who they were; instead many identified more with their tribal or ethnic affiliations such as the Ibo in Nigeria or the Twa in Ghana. Where, I wondered, do I fit? What is my tribal affiliation? I decided to research further to discover where in Africa my ancestors came from, and because this wasn't common knowledge in my family, I set out to learn about that important missing part of our past.

My decision was furthered by my studies in anthropology in college. During my second year of school I purchased the PatriClan DNA test from *African Ancestry*, which traces the Y chromosomes and yields results that offer DNA matches for people living in modern day countries of the world. This purchase did in fact impact my learning, because I was able to use what I learned inside the classroom and apply that knowledge to my life. It was unsettling to find that paternally I shared ancestry with people living in modern day Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, especially considering that the Portuguese initiated the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, before Spain followed suit. I felt that I was a spade in a game most valued for helping the conquerors win the wealth and influence that has saturated the world and manipulated the books we read. I had learned that that legacy lived on in my own body, and that sickened me, yet I continued to do research on my ancestral background.



Figure 1. Nicholls Island from the coast, situated 300 meters off the coast of Cameroon, where the depth of water allowed the boats to dock. Photo courtesy Nicka Smith, 2010.

Upon reflection, the notion of self has been integral to me, in part because though I knew that I had to have African ancestry, being African-American, my surname was Dutch and didn't reflect how I saw myself nor how others saw me. There is complexity in identity. Aside from being black in America, I was also shorter than average, which lends itself to its own brand of criticism from people both inside and outside of my ethnic group. In short, I needed a reason to know if there was something wrong with me for feeling African, even though my feet had never touched African soil, nor did I possess a name that would ethnically mirror how I felt inside.

The Dutch are among the tallest people in the world and I stood tall as a pygmy in a forest of questions. Looking in the mirror at an African face with a European surname confused me, but as I learned more about my ancestry, the more I came to understand the prominence that the name Vasser held in the Netherlands and hence the impact it would have on my life. It's the name I inherited from my father through the patriline, while the name itself originated in Holland. It is thought to be of noble stock; even now people comment on how dignified it sounds on my tongue. There are more variations in the spelling of the Vasser name than I care to mention here, but I have learned that Vasser descendants had hence moved to France, changing the *er* to an *ar*, in an effort to reinvent themselves in a foreign land. After learning that they came to America to reinvent themselves, I felt that it was only fitting to reinvent myself as well, and that someday I would, but on my own terms.

I carried the name of my father, but as I got older I felt the legacy of colonialism, because even that name was not his, yet our surname manifested itself into my identity. My mother's surname mirrored a similar fate. A Scott, she and her ancestral lineage also faced one of the legacies of colonialism, the taking away of one's own name and the imposition of another. As an African-American, I rebelled against that legacy whenever I could. I was in middle school when I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as told by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, and vowed to one day change my name to something of my own choosing. I was disgusted with the notion of colonialism and needed some way of avenging my African relatives whose names have been lost in the waves of the Atlantic, so that I may indirectly embark upon the journey of self-discovery, much like the Vassers that left Holland for France or elsewhere in the world. Interestingly enough however, I realized that if I replaced the name, I would have then erased another part of the history of my family in some way. Who would be accountable for our arrival to the shores of America if I changed it? At least with the name intact, there is a direct line of where to seek for answers.

I wanted to have a conversation with other members of the African Diaspora on the subject of identity in the post-colonial context. The interview that

follows is one of those conversations. Among the questions in my questionnaire I included: “If you could describe who you are in **one word**, what would it be and why?” So, in the spirit of the post-colonial narrative of so many throughout the world, let’s meet *Resourceful*, who identifies as black and grew up in a loving family. Her mother is black and her father is of mixed race. Growing up on the east coast of the United States, she always identified as black because both of her parents were also, though she found out more about her paternal racial makeup three to four years ago. Her father, who identifies as *American*, used the same company, *African Ancestry*, as I did to trace his paternal ancestry; and interestingly enough, his paternal DNA and mine were very similar, with the Netherlands being one of the places in the world where he shares paternal ancestry with others.

To many within the African-American community, the notion of identity is of great importance. With respect to remembering where our ancestors came from, there are many African institutions and traditions within our culture. From the African Methodist Episcopal Church to social clubs, organizations and others with African names, meanings and symbols, our community has tried tirelessly to preserve our heritages, but what of the belief systems, villages, and people from whence we came? Is it enough to be human or is there a broader need for membership and belonging that is missing in the lives of those directly and indirectly affected by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and colonization?

In time I came to learn about communities in the Caribbean, Suriname, and Holland and in other places in the world that identified as Afro-Dutch, much how we identify as Afro-American in the United States, and I began to question if there were similarities in how we lived and if they too yearned for *home*. Due to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, it would have been very likely that my family would have ended up in any of these places in the world. I believe that within the Afro-Dutch community we share continuity in our African ancestry, even if it seems that we are all living separate identities. Treading the Atlantic for me is living in the middle because it is in the middle that I live day to day. Maneuvering from the blackness of family life to the whiteness of societal norms in America leaves me in an uncomfortable state of liminality. It’s a language. Mason Bassett, a fictional character that I have created through my poetry, walks the middle; he walks the line of living in *two* worlds for most of his life. It’s easier for me to create scenarios for Mason because my lived experiences are at times too much to bear, and the world seems to not even hear my screams for help. Mason makes it easier to articulate the difficulty of not truly living on either side of Africa or America but rather treading the Atlantic in a state of balance.

Introducing Mason Bassett

So he grabbed the face towel to remove the black
 until the skin peeled pink across the surface.
 Instances became rooms without doors
 windows or light. For him, daylight
 was a lamp and night was the sun.
 Remnants of his past stained the white
 and never left the fiber – destined
 like the exodus that led to questioning
 the currency of one's weight in cowries
 iron bars or rum.
 Now, the sugar no longer sweetens
 and drinking history becomes a ritual
 needed in the waking hours
 when the Windsor meets the center
 and oxfords carry his stride.

I can never walk the streets of the American South and truly participate in its culture, because I know that there are places there where I would be uncomfortable. Or when visiting the East Coast, in say New York (once New Amsterdam), I am constantly reminded of this nation's history as I overlook the colonial architecture in the restaurants and homes. Out West it's the staring and the looking directly away. I was born in the Midwest, in one of the few blue cities in a red state, meaning that outside of St. Louis and Kansas City, the rest of Missouri sided with the South during the Civil War of 1861-1865, where many Africans were enslaved, living in the middle, oppressed, and made constantly aware of their difference.

In *Introducing Mason Bassett* I recall a moment in my life when I was so exasperated that I literally tried to remove the black from my face because it seemed that regardless of how pleasant I was or intelligent, to many I was nothing more than a nigger, and in feeling depressed with powerlessness I took that anger out on myself. In western society, there is this need to assimilate into the culture so much that one would alter their appearance by straightening their hair, bleaching their skin, or even getting plastic surgery to look more European to fit in, because their Africanness or "otherness" is cause for public debate. This poem also references some of the lasting legacies of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade with its mention of sugar, coffee, and clothing made of cotton that have become so ingrained in our lives that their origins are often never given a second thought.

Along my quest for understanding, I looked into the experiences of others within the African Diaspora. I asked pointed questions about their family histories, where they lived, how they self-identified regarding their ancestry, the advan-

tages or disadvantages their identity provided, the importance of the past, and asked where home was to them. Lastly, I asked my participants to reflect on the hardest aspect of who they are. The results were varied, as their answers reflected possible opinions that members of the African Diaspora have regarding their experiences in a post-colonial society. My interest was in those who shared the surname Vasser with me, even though we have only met through LinkedIn, an online community, and to the best of our knowledge aren't family. What we all have in common is our understanding of our African ancestry in the presence of a shared European surname, but then again, isn't that part of the legacy of colonialism? So many people were displaced into different parts of the world and were given the names of those that either enslaved them or participated in the manifest destiny of their lands.



Figure 2. Bimbia ruins, the historic slave trade market situated at the East Coast of Limbe subdivision, South-West region of Cameroon. Photo courtesy Nicka Smith, 2010.

For the sake of argument, I have always found a connection and self-identified as *African*. Before discovering that my maternal ancestry traced to the Bamileke in Cameroon, I knew there was more behind my identity than being black in America. But I also understood that people identified differently for their own reasons, so in these two interviews, we have a conversation with three Vassers who I have labelled, the *African* (myself), *Resourceful*, and the *American*, each one identifying

differently for various reasons, exploring their stories in a dialog. Let's take a look at the interview I had with *Resourceful*. As we will see in the interview with the *American* later, these responses reflect how their experiences shape their lives.

jason/African: What advantages does your identity provide for you?

Resourceful: I have been very fortunate and blessed to have an incredible family who loves me and raised me from a child to an adult. They helped with college, etc. However, I cannot think of anyone else from another race who has ever said, "Oh, she's Black, let's help her". So, I don't see an "advantage" per se. What I know is – I am a Black Woman, so if someone is looking to "check two boxes" (Black and Woman) for any reason, then I would be considered. I believe I should be considered on qualifications and merit, not on my race/ethnicity.

jason/African: What disadvantages does your identity provide for you?

Resourceful: Black women are not always portrayed well in mainstream society (television shows), and I believe individuals in small town America as well as other countries believe that "we" are all the same. If your only exposure to Black people is what you see on TV you are in trouble. However, I find that there are many places where people don't know anyone of colour, do not regularly/daily see people of colour, or even if they know people of colour, they don't have any minority friends. How could they possibly learn from others or understand anything beyond what they see or hear when they do not interact with people of other races in their daily lives? Allow me to share a story: I visited Japan three times. When my husband and I would go places, I noticed that many Japanese women (especially) stared at me. I asked my husband why, and he said: "Because they aren't used to seeing Black people in all hues." Interesting. I also noticed that the only "Black shows" on television in Japan at that time were shows that portrayed and cast Blacks in a limited way.

jason/African: Were your ancestors brought to America enslaved?

Resourceful: On my mother's side, yes, probably. My father's mother is $\frac{3}{4}$ Cherokee (her mother was full-Cherokee; her father was $\frac{1}{2}$ Cherokee and $\frac{1}{2}$ Black as far as we know). So, she was an American Indian and Black ... so if her Father was $\frac{1}{2}$ Black – then, yes, he may have been enslaved and brought to America from Africa. My paternal grandfather (Vasser) and his entire side were very fair-skinned, often mistaken – but they never tried to pass for white as I understand it. My paternal grandparents are American Indian, Black and mixed race (apparently, Dutch, possibly from England and Spain) ... Why? My Father also had his DNA tested 3-4 years ago to determine ethnicity on the male side of the Vasser family. The report showed 20+ DNA sequences and none of the sequences showed a link to any countries in Africa on the Vasser side of our family.

jason/African: What have you learned about your surname and the people that passed that name down to you?

Resourceful: The Vassers were landowners and business owners. They owned land in Virginia and New Jersey. My second cousin (who would have been in his late 90's if he was still alive) was the Mayor of West Cape May, New Jersey for 29 years. My Grandfather worked for a funeral home in Philadelphia, PA and managed a farm in Cape May.

jason/African: How important is it to remember the past?

Resourceful: It is imperative that we not only know our history, but also remember it and pass it on. And in what context should readers of history remember it? Answer: As people, we are a beautiful and unique combination of our ancestors. No one is just from one place or solely one ethnicity. A person may be Dutch because both parents claim they are Dutch, but their grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents or others in their family may not be Dutch.

jason/African: If you could describe who you are in one word, what would it be and why?

Resourceful: *Resourceful* – Whenever someone asks me to assist them or provide advice, I take that very seriously. I don't dismiss it, because I believe the person asked because they believe I can help in some way. It's important to me. So, I will work until I find a solution, give sound advice, or find a person who can help them.

jason/African: Given that your surname is Dutch, do you consider the Netherlands home or is home someplace else?

Resourceful: It is exciting to know that my surname is Dutch; however, I consider Alexandria, VA and Southern New Jersey home. (Explanation: Alexandria, VA because I've lived here for 21 years, and Southern NJ because I was born there, spent several summers there, and my parents, grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins still live in NJ). However, I would like to visit the Netherlands now that I know that my surname is Dutch.

jason/African: What has been the hardest aspect of being who you are?

Resourceful: I like who I am. I wish I knew more about my ancestors. Unfortunately, the previous generation of Vassers did not communicate much. They held things in. At least my father was able to get a lot of info through his research and conversations over the last four decades. He has lots of family photos, books with birth and death announcements, and other information.

After a follow-up phone conversation with *Resourceful*, I learned a bit more about the complexities of ethnicity, especially when it came to skin colour. One part of the black experience is that there is no hiding or blending in. When a person of colour enters a room, or takes a photo with those of different ethnicities, they are immediately noticed. With respect to the point made that many television shows, and other modes of media display negative portrayals of people of colour, the notion of not blending in becomes a stark reality.

Skin colour brings about a host of societal challenges, particularly in the post-colonial context. It's this notion that dark is wrong and that white is right as in the motifs of the villain and hero, devil's food cake – angel food cake and others. The danger is over time, with forced acculturation into western society, many of those dark-skinned people are discriminated against and then values are placed in their *blackness* or *whiteness*, both inside and outside of their perceived cultural backgrounds. So, the past is important to *Resourceful* as it is also to millions of other members of the African Diaspora that wish to learn more about their African selves.



Figure 3. Nicholls Island off the coast of Cameroon leading to Bimbia, a slave trading post used during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Photo courtesy Nicka Smith, 2010.

Treading the Atlantic will look different depending on who you ask, but I hypothesize that questions about Africa have always been present, in the far reaches of the mind and heart of many members of the African Diaspora. It's interesting how pets, particularly dogs, are admired, especially pure-bred ones, and if one is lost, in need, or in danger, there are many outlets to get that animal the help it needs. On the other hand, those Africans lost to the waves of the Atlantic and their displaced families from plantations are limited in how they are allowed to identify themselves; and as time passes, the descendants of those Africans are made to believe that they are not African at all, but something else.

Dog abroad

A Labrador retriever
 taken with family
 away to say, America
 is still a Labrador retriever
 years after generations
 have ran and fetched.

In this poem we find that dogs get to keep their pedigree, while so many members of the African Diaspora have to live in the ambiguity of where they find themselves.

In casual conversations I've had with people from varied walks of life, I find it interesting that, generally, people are in different places when it comes to their ancestry. Some, like me, think about it constantly while others do not. Given that The United States of America is a nation of immigrants, it's an interesting conversation to have. But what does it mean to be an American? In my interview with the *American*, I got a glimpse of what *can be* achieved in a post-colonial society.

jason/African: Do you reside in North America?

American: Yes

jason/African: How do you self-identify, i.e. Black, African American, Afro-Dutch, other?

American: American

jason/African: What advantages does that identity provide for you?

American: Being in more of the majority of people.

jason/African: What disadvantages does that identity provide for you?

American: None

jason/African: Were your ancestors brought to America enslaved?

American: Don't know, but I think my Forefathers were "free" land owning people in Virginia.

jason/African: What have you learned about your surname and the people that passed that name down to you?

American: They were German, Jewish, etc.

jason/African: How important is it to remember the past?

American: It is important, but because I belong to an old family, which most have passed on, it is hard to get new information. There are so many mixed races involved.

jason/African: If you could describe who you are in one word, what would it be and why?

American: *American*, I was born here and that is all I know.

jason/African: Given that your surname is Dutch, do you consider the Netherlands home or is home someplace else?

American: No and home is America (USA).

jason/African: What has been the hardest aspect of being who you are?

American: With so many ethnic groups involved, I really don't know who I am except being American. My father's people originated from Europe. My mother's people are Native American, with my mother's father being half Black and half Native American. So, what am I? Still cannot answer after all these years.

Sadly, the *American's* father passed away when he was thirty-seven years old, the same age as I was when I wrote this essay. Having had this conversation with him about life is very significant for me and I thank him for sharing his experiences. The most important lesson that I learned from my conversations with the *American* was the possibility of what can be accomplished. The *American* grew up in a diverse neighbourhood where everybody knew one another and developed meaningful relationships. Until this day, his closest friends are members of the diverse environment in which he grew up. During one of those conversations, I asked him what being American meant to him and his response was that he was hard working. The *American* believed that people were innately good and that their worth was measured in their work ethic.

The reality for the *American* growing up in Virginia was that though he knew little about his cultural origin, he understood the importance of questioning it. The beauty in his experience is that his "Blackness" was never a factor in his childhood. For many of the African Diaspora in general, their Blackness is always a factor, but wouldn't it be something if it wasn't. That is the America I thought I lived in growing up in St. Louis, but sadly it isn't.

I was so excited about the life the *American* lived, that I wondered if it was possible to achieve that level of freedom to just be. To just be a person. To just be someone who works hard and plays harder. I longed for my (perceived) racial background to not be a reason for discrimination or humiliation, or retaliation for just being who I am and wanting to express myself as those around me do so freely. I too wanted to say with confidence to those who say "Well on my mother's side I'm Irish and on my father's side we are Scottish", I just wanted to add to the conversation. The *American* inspired me to write another poem, *acculturation*, about my father, who embodies a similar freedom.

acculturation

he was pops back then,
 who played loud white people's music, as I called it.
 i was confused by him whistling and shuffling cards
 to the beat of what I've never listened to
 long enough to relate to;
 but he was himself,
 something I then had yet to find...
 in my dreadlocks that stretched to my behind
 and a chip on my shoulder / dat weighed heavy on my mind
 there was freedom in his ridiculous
 something authentic
 like old shoes repaired
 then worn again.

My father was Steely Dan and Stevie Wonder, a chameleon of a person who worked in corporate America, only to feed his true love for magic. There was never a time that he wasn't performing magic; whether he was working with a deck of cards or metal coins, he was working the feather of ease in the most difficult of illusions. He would say "Be yourself" when we parted ways or finished having an intellectual conversation. I was his Buffalo Soldier who grew to love and know him as someone who never met a stranger and I'd like to think that trait lives on within me. God rest his soul, Dad passed away shortly before this was published, and, like the *American*, he didn't consider himself to be African either, but rather indulged in the culinary arts of different cultures, often speaking the languages of those he interacted with. I would like to dedicate this narrative to him; traversing unfamiliar waters, always smiling, always learning.

Is it not ideal to be who you are, regardless of what that means? I think I learned from my father, from the *American* and from *Resourceful* that it is indeed possible to be yourself. Through the miracle of DNA tracing I have learned that I received my African ancestry from my mother, who inherited it from her mother and so on. All those years ago, during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, a Cameroonian woman survived and passed her genes down to me. My maternal relative, Mary Jones, was born in 1810 in North Carolina into slavery. She was Bamileke and so am I; and perhaps she is why I decided to embark on this subject to begin with, to return and pick it up, as they say in Ghana. I have reinvented myself, much like the Vassers of Holland that moved to France, that changed the *er* to an *ar*, and among other things, I have embraced my Cameroonian and Netherlandic ancestries. Reclaiming and then merging parts of my identity that were taken from me makes me proud to be who I am in all of my complexity.

And so, I walk the line in old shoes leading to my Atlantic that is a rainforest in colours vast, a great ocean, a garden of creation that becomes even more alive at night, under a full moon. Each generation building off of the next, sea fans and sponges kept in balance by parrotfish as Spanish dancers sway to the current in their red mantels and trumpetfish use their muse and become what they lay against. Where there are decorator crabs that in their thrift carry life, as do orange fish grooming themselves against the backs of sharks.

In my ancestral home, “The People Down There” as they are called, communicate in French and English though few speak Ghomala, one of the many indigenous languages spoken in the region. But *ah’ tchieh choueh pah* ‘let’s enjoy our meal or drink’ in celebration for those that do. I have come to learn that the Bamileke people are comprised of eight different kingdoms, each with their own identifying characteristics, Baka Pygmy being one of them, who are the original ones who helped carry on their traditional ways. The Baka are short in stature and stocky. They are known as the keepers of the culture and when I see myself in a mirror, I envision a past that isn’t really the past at all.

About the author

Jason N. Vasser-Elong is a poet and essayist who was born and raised in Saint Louis, Missouri, but has maternal ancestral roots in Cameroon, Central Africa. In 2014 the Cameroon Royal Council gave the name Elong (Eh-long) to him, and after embracing it, he added that name to reflect his family’s legacy.

Jason earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing from the University of Missouri – St. Louis after studying cultural anthropology and presenting his ethnographic research *Rhyme and reason: Poetics as societal dialogue*. His most recent poetry appears in *Black lives have always mattered* (2 Leaf Press, 2017), edited by Abiodun Oyewole, *Crossing the divide: From the poets of Saint Louis* (Vagabond, 2016), and *Unveiling visions: The alchemy of the Black imagination* (New York Public Library exhibition, 2015-2016).

His forthcoming debut collection of poetry *shrimp* (2 Leaf Press, 2018) examines identity and culture for someone of the African diaspora living in the post-colonial context.

Author contact: jnvasser@gmail.com.

Faire du surplace dans l’Atlantique

Dans la composition, *Faire du surplace dans l’Atlantique*, il s’agit de la façon dont l’héritage du colonialisme touche la conscience de soi dans le contexte social dans lequel on vit. Ce récit permettra au lecteur de regarder la société dans la perspective de quelqu’un qui « fait du surplace dans l’Atlantique »

par des expériences sur la lutte, sur l'auto-efficacité et sur la spiritualité. Cette fusion de l'art et de la science vise à souligner la dissonance cognitive de ceux que le colonialisme affecte historiquement et personnellement. L'auteur du récit ne cherche pas à rendre quelqu'un responsable, mais plutôt à informer le lecteur des réflexions journalistiques des gens touchés par le colonialisme.

Watertrappen in de Atlantische Oceaan

In *Watertrappen in de Atlantische Oceaan* beschrijf ik hoe de erfenis van het kolonialisme het zelfbeeld beïnvloedt in de sociale context waarin men leeft. Deze beschrijving stelt de lezer in staat om naar de samenleving te kijken door de bril van iemand die voortdurend bezig is te "watertrappen in de Atlantische Oceaan", in een leven getekend door strijd, zelfbeschouwing en spiritualiteit. Deze combinatie van kunst en wetenschap wil de aandacht vestigen op de cognitieve dissonantie die plaatsvindt in diegenen die persoonlijk en historisch zijn getekend door het kolonialisme. De schrijver van dit essay heeft niet de bedoeling schuld toe te wijzen aan specifieke personen, maar om de lezer te inzicht te bieden in de dagelijkse gedachtenkronkels van mensen wier levens door het kolonialisme zijn geraakt.