

[West Oakland to West Africa \(WO2WA\)](#) We are poets crossing the Atlantic to compete in a Poetry Slam and cultural exchange that culminates a year-long pan-African poetry writing workshop. Our ages are 21-65. Our sexualities, gender and racial identities vary. Our life experiences, socio-economic classes, upbringings are diverse, but we are mostly Black Americans. I am the leader of this group that has committed to writing linked poetry with exchange partners in the West African countries of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. Now we are to meet-- face to face- the people with whom we have shared so much.

Led by [Sir Black](#) of [Ehalakasa](#), our partner group in Accra, our Ghanaian partner poets average age 26 and are mostly male students at the University of Lagon in Accra. We also have partner poets in Cote d'Ivoire. As the partnership grows, the exchange expands to include more women on their side, and more men on our side (or at least we try), but the gender imbalance is noticeable. I contemplate the factors that contribute to there being more American women and more West African men who participate in this exchange. I ask you to do so as well.

Finally the day has arrived. After a flight of over 24 hours, we are met at the airport by Sir Black and his team, Jeneral and 100%. They are two comedians that bill themselves as the “[2 Idiots](#).” Their act is far from idiotic. Their last production, which toured Ghana and Germany was a re-enactment of Kafka’s “The Trial” adapted to comment on the judicial and prison system here in Ghana.

Disembarking the plane takes what feels like hours. We learn to accommodate for a wheel chair and a walker, almost unheard of at the Accra airport. The heat blasts those who make it quickly through immigration. Sweat begins to creep down my spine, but it is also a welcome contrast to the frigid airplane. Two of the poets have forgotten their Yellow Fever cards at home, despite months of preparing them for this right of passage. I must pay a bribe of \$20 for one, and the second is stopped and held by immigration for about 30 minutes while we try to get Wi-Fi to prove she has the shot record- which she has stored on her phone. As Americans, we are so used to free and unlimited Wi-Fi, it suddenly hits us, that we are in a land where there are limits. Eventually, after another \$20 and some negotiations, a new Yellow Card is dispensed, and we are free to move on to baggage collection.

We collect our bags and head to exchange money. Because we are a big group of Americans, the taxi drivers haggle with each other about who will get to take us to the hostel, all hoping for a big tip, but we have ordered a bus which is on its way. During our 30-minute wait for the trotro, the heat swoops in, mosquitos. People who would like to see us better crowd in, others who would like to get past, push on through annoyed by the hubbub we create. We are *obruni*, which means foreigners, but has come to mean whites. As African Americans, this just does not resonate, but we are blind with joy at the feeling of homecoming. In Ghana, in particular, there is more and more awareness amongst the local people, that African Americans have traceable lineage, but I can hear the term whispered as we walk by. It cannot be denied that our bodies hold both a race and a nationality; we carry US Dollars; we create a different kind of stir. Our walk, our gate,

our speaking tone and accents are all things that make us so uniquely *African American* in the states, ironically, these traits make us *African American* here.

Sir Black has arrived and the poets chat in English exchanging names and greetings, I hear a lot of laughter. A silence descends like the night, when we begin our journey to the parking lot where the *trotro* is parked. A *trotro* is similar to a minivan, except it has as many seats as you need it to. In this case, it seats 9, but we can always make it 12. Plus there is the baggage. We have as many bags as we have people, plus carry-ons. The *trotro* is parked not far away, but the road is dark and unpaved. The suitcases do not roll. At that moment, I realize we have left the walker behind. Sir Black and I head back into the airport to retrieve lost luggage. Luckily, it is easy! We are finally on our way- 10 in the van with all the baggage and 5 plus the walker Sir Black's 1990's model black Mercedes.

Ghana! Here we come!

Blog 2: W.E.B. Du Bois, US Embassy, The Poets Meet

This is the day we have all been waiting for. After a good night's rest at [Agoo Hostel](#), known for hosting artist groups, entrepreneurs and volunteers, we arise refreshed. To my surprise all the sleeping quarters have air conditioning (we expected only 2 would have that privilege) there is hot water for showers and best of all, there is Wi-Fi. After a nice breakfast of eggs, fresh fruit, coffee and tea, we begin to gather for our first writing activity. It is at this moment, that my carefully planned agenda begins to fall apart.

Due to a last minute invitation and then cancellation for lunch to the [US Embassy](#), we begin the slippery slope decline towards "going with the flow." Time begins to lose meaning. At first, the invitation to the US Embassy seemed too much to pass up. The Ghanaian poets are so excited to be able to have access to Embassy. Sir Black and I spent days rounding up passport numbers and getting clearance only to be told on the day of, that the Ghanaian poets cannot enter the Embassy. We, Americans, decide to delay our visit, hoping to arrive in time for lunch.

Sir Black arrives and we decide meet the poets at [W.E.B. DuBois Pan African Cultural Center](#), but this would cost too much money in terms of taxis. Finally we decide that all the poets will come to Agoo Hostel, which was the original plan.

Because I was the facilitator and I knew my partner, my rendering of this moment cannot capture the essence of the feeling. As the poets entered one by one, they met their partners. I neglected to mention that while our original exchange group consisted of 15 people, 10 poets were able to make the trip. Of the ten, we were nine African Americans and one Jewish American who identifies as white. Also, one poet missed the flight from the US and was not in attendance. However, one by one, the poets entered and as they were able to greet the person with whom they had been exchanging letters for close to a year, the room began to fill with laughter and hugs were exchanged. Because of social media, we had seen photos and even videos of each other as well as exchanged on Skype, yet there is nothing like the human contact, the touch and the ability to look someone in

the eye. Sharing space is such an intimate act. In the US right now, the idea of space is so alive, we have safe spaces and free speech spaces and making space and so to share space felt good. It was invigorating. Also to be able to have our black bodies connect with and touch other black bodies. This moment felt as if the goal of the exchange had already been achieved, but it was only the beginning.

In circle, we shared our names, one thing we loved and about our families. We had two poets whose partners could not come and they were assigned new partners for the week. At the end of the warm welcome, we left for the US Embassy, where, we did miss lunch.

US Embassy and W.E.B. Du Bois Center

The connection between the US and Ghana is ancient. Unfortunately it has been mostly about economic gains for the few and not so much in terms of cultural exchange. It's pretty sad to see that other previous colonial powers at least allocate funds for cultural centers such as the [Alliance Francaise](#) (France) and the [GoetheCenter](#) (Germany). Even the Chinese are beginning to invest in arts and culture in Ghana. It seems that the US policies are purely economic or militaristic. It would be nice to see some cultural investment by US Foundations. That being said, the Embassy welcomed us, we ate what was left over and made some new friends. We it was a warm welcome and we were able to see how the Embassy works and exchange some money. After that, we walked around the block to W.E.B. Du Bois Center.

DuBois moved to Ghana at the end of his life and collaborated with Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Independent Ghana. He lived here in Accra with his second wife, writing and working on several books. He also died here. He and his wife are buried in a mausoleum near his last home, which is now a museum and center.

DuBois came to Ghana at the behest of Nkrumah who had been an organizer of the first Pan-African National Congress in 1945. This congress is known to have been a key factor in the liberation of many African countries from colonialism. Ghana gained independence in 1957. In 1961, Nkrumah invited Dr. DuBois to Ghana and collaborate on the creating of an Encyclopedia of African Achievement.

We did all of that on day 1! We were officially in Ghana now. How did the group hold up? Terrifically well. We took taxis to the Embassy and then walked to the DuBois Center. We then taxied back to the hostel where we ate dinner. Tonight, jet lag will hit and it will hit hard.