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# What Lies in the Gray: Creative Analytic Pieces on the Formation and Evolution of Beliefs in Masxha

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WHAT LIES IN THE GRAY:  
CREATIVE ANALYTIC PIECES ON THE FORMATION AND EVOLUTION OF BELIEFS  
IN MASXHA

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School for International Training

Community Health and Social Policy Spring 2018

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First and foremost, to the eight people who graciously welcomed me into their hearts and homes, and shared with me their beautiful, personal stories....

to the Masxha community for making me feel loved and welcomed the minute I arrived...

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Part I:  
Preparations and Project Background

### Abstract

The purpose of this project was to look at how members of Durban's Masxha township develop their belief systems and ideas about their world. This topic was developed out of a desire to better understand the factors that promote or inhibit individuals from changing their mind about topics relating to their community, society, and culture. I sought to gain a deeper understanding of the specific context of Masxha and the experiences and lives of those with whom I spoke.

To accomplish the goal of learning from lived experiences, this study employed a narrative inquiry approach. Using loosely-structured interviews involving eight Masxha residents, this project was deeply-rooted in participants sharing their lived experiences surrounding the development of their beliefs; the wide array of responses gathered from interviews illustrates the highly individualized nature of these conversations. I found that participants' beliefs were far less black and white than I had initially anticipated. The nature of my interviews—they were one-on-one and I encouraged the telling of personal stories—allowed participants to share the gray areas of their belief formation in richly descriptive ways. I didn't know it at the time of my interviews, but these gray areas would become an essential component in my personal reflection on this project.

This paper sought to illustrate the complexity of the belief narratives I heard and to demonstrate that the gray areas—the spaces in between understanding and clarity—are where opportunities for learning take place. This paper also explored findings on the roles of both community and family members in the development of beliefs and the highly complex and personal process of navigating belief formation and evolution.

These stories have been interwoven into a series of creative analytic pieces<sup>1</sup> that serve as snapshots into the far more intricate experiences of the eight individuals whose narratives, by and large, form this project's foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> This expression, 'creative analytic pieces,' was derived from the work of Laurel Richardson (2000). How I came to use expression is elaborated upon on page 17 of this paper.

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### Frequently Used Terms

<i>Worldview</i>	“The picture [one has] of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order” (Geertz, 1966 in Pals, D. L., 2009).
<i>ISP</i>	Acronym for Independent Study Project.
<i>Belief (system)</i>	“The stories we tell ourselves to define our personal sense of Reality...it is through this mechanism that we individually, ‘ <i>make sense</i> ’ of the world around us” (Usó-Doménech, J. L. & Nescolarde-Selva, J., 2015).
<i>Idea</i> <sup>2</sup>	“An opinion or belief; a concept of pure reason, not empirically based in experience” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010).
<i>Paradigm</i>	“...a worldview—a way of thinking about and making sense of the complexities of the real world...Paradigms tell us what is important, legitimate, and reasonable” (Patton, 2002 in Bruzas, pers comm, 2018).
<i>Masxha</i>	Refers to the Durban township in which this project took place. The names “Cato Manor,” and “Cato” come up multiple times in this project. They can be used interchangeably in reference to the same location.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this project I use the terms ‘belief’ and ‘idea’ relatively interchangeably; however, I included the definitions of both here to show the subtle differences in their meanings.



### Why Study Beliefs, Why Now?

“Believe it or not, many of the things we hold to be true are not the product of fact and reason”  
(Post Magazine, 2015)<sup>3</sup>.

This project is deeply rooted in my own curiosity about how people make meaning of a world filled with information and ideas that are often confusing and contradictory. As I grew closer with my homestay family, I learned more about the devout Christianity that guides the actions of not only those I was living with but many other households I visited in Masxha as well. I latched on to the idea of religion being a vehicle for creating meaning in our lives and developed a working question: "How do the understandings of health and approaches to healing differ among religious communities around Durban?" With diligent introspection into the personal attachment I feel with this topic, I realized my own faith and the evolution of my beliefs as a Christian were a major driving force fueling my curiosity about religion. While this question interested me, I wondered what other tools for making meaning existed in the Masxha community and how I could frame my research topic to allow individual stories to paint their own picture of belief systems. I decided broadening the question beyond the realm of religion would make room for a wider range of belief narratives to come through in this project.

Eventually, in the middle of writing a poem that ultimately solidified my research question, I realized how thin the line between questioning your beliefs and disrespecting your community is; is fear of familial tension a factor that drives people to, so readily, accept what they are told at a young age as fact? What makes certain beliefs so strong that individuals, especially in the realm of socio-political discourse, are unwilling to even consider that another belief or idea could be valid? After reflecting on these ideas, the question at the core of this project became, “How do individuals develop their beliefs about the world and what factors promote or inhibit the evolution of these beliefs during one’s lifetime?” This question then gave rise to my first objective, to understand how people learn their beliefs and assign those beliefs relative strengths. The use of word “belief” was very deliberate. This word opened the project up

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<sup>3</sup> This quote comes from an online article from Post Magazine. The author of this article is not included on the website; thus, it is not included in my reference list.  
Accessed from: <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1773296/beliefs-why-do-we-have-them-and-how-did-we->

to explore the history of debate and polarization in South Africa and how one's "firmly held positions" on various topics may further this polarization.<sup>4</sup>

With this question outlined, I developed two additional project objectives. The first of which was to learn about how people change their beliefs throughout their lives. My use of qualitative, narrative interviews lent itself well to the fulfillment of this objective. Because of the loose structure of my interviews, I was able to ask relatively broad questions that encouraged participants to speak to whatever experiences with beliefs resonated most with them.

The final objective was to understand how the strength with which individuals hold their beliefs may factor into debates currently going on in South Africa. An article from News24 illustrated the importance of this objective within the context of South Africa.

*Among some of the nearly impossible things to come across in South Africa these days is a decent debate. When I listen to what's being aired in the public space regarding economic policies and the way forward, what comes across is an attitude of outright dismissal and unwillingness to engage with ideas (Mathekga, 2017).*

This resistance to considering other ideas underpinned the contextual relevance of this study. To better understand why people more readily engage in arguments and stalemate than civil discourse, I wanted to look at the root cause of disagreements—beliefs that do not align. This project aimed to gain insights into some of the causes of polarization while also appreciating the unique and rich histories that form the basis of many beliefs held in South Africa today. Through conversations with interviewees, the legacy of apartheid in South Africa and its pertinence to this topic surfaced. Beliefs about race relations, ideas on how the country should be run, and isolation of racial groups—and consequently their beliefs—were all topics that came up in interviews. In retrospect, the words of participants solidified the importance and relevance of this topic in the context of South Africa. The apartheid regime involved economic, political, and residential segregation along racial lines. Because of this history, beliefs regarding the current state of the nation remain largely polarized (de Klerk, L., 2016, pp. 19-22).

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<sup>4</sup> The term belief is defined as “an acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof; something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held position” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010).

This project does not, however, aim to make generalized knowledge claims about South Africans, Durban residents, or even all people living in Masxha. When referring to the “context of South Africa” within this study, I am utilizing the national context to infer about potential paradigms shaped by South Africa’s history and present reality. Above all else, this project strove to use the narratives of eight individuals as a tool for illustrating a topic as opposed to providing specific answers to a question. The stories, ideas, and beliefs of participants are the backbone and inspiration of this final written product.

### **Building on Past Research**

The questions explored in this project do not stand on their own; rather, they are informed by prior research on beliefs, religion, and individualistic thought. In preparation for my ISP, I looked carefully at secondary sources pertaining to belief systems, specifically the work of Craig Shealy and his analysis of beliefs and values. One's beliefs and values make up a particular version of reality (VOR) which then serves as a lens through which the world is filtered, experienced, and interpreted. (Shealy et al., 2012 in Shealy, C. N., 2016). "This perspective suggests a fundamental paradox in that two human beings are capable of asserting two diametrically opposed VORs while simultaneously declaring with complete certitude that one's own VOR is true and good whereas the other is not" (Shealy, C. N., 2016, pp. 5). The idea that two individuals can believe their own reality to be superior invalidity to that of another is at the root of many debates. The concept of individual versions of reality comes up throughout this paper. Through reading and analyzing the claims made by Sealy regarding the uniqueness of individual realities, I was able to understand more of the complexities associated with belief formation.

Previous studies have also looked at how paradigms are formed and changed over time. At this point, I feel it is important to distinguish between the terms "belief" and "paradigm." The definition of belief that I use throughout this project is "an acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof; something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held position" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010). A paradigm, however, operates on a greater scale than a belief—within a paradigm, beliefs and ideas exist, but a paradigm itself is not necessarily a belief. Paradigms inform what one chooses to believe. Semantically, these two words cannot be used interchangeably. I used sources relating to paradigms to inform my project about beliefs

because, while paradigms are more of an overarching worldview as opposed to an idea about a specific topic or idea, the process of forming and evolving beliefs and paradigms are similar in nature and complexity. The power of both beliefs and paradigms to inform one's meaning-making processes are also quite similar. The difference between paradigms and beliefs is critical to note, yet in the context of this paper, it is a difference I found to be somewhat subtle. In a project focusing on beliefs, because of the subtlety of difference between beliefs and paradigms, I feel comfortable using prior research on paradigms to inform and enhance my understanding of beliefs.

Patton speaks to the role of paradigms as a means of understanding one's world and making meaning. He asserts that "A paradigm is a worldview—a way of thinking about and making sense of the complexities of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: Paradigms tell us what is important, legitimate, and reasonable" (Patton, 2002 in Bruzas, pers comm, 2018). As per Patton's claim, paradigms are the way in which people make meaning out of the gray areas—the parts of our lives that are often confusing and highly objective. One popular theorist, Thomas Kuhn, discussed the idea of a paradigm in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. While his theories were directly pertaining to how the field of science evolves over time, his definition of a paradigm can still be used this study. Kuhn defines a paradigm as "accepted examples of actual scientific practice... [that] provide models from which spring coherent traditions" (Kuhn, T. S., 1970). In this study, I observed the presence of both "accepted examples of practice" and "coherent traditions." I would argue the above-cited definition of belief as "something one accepts as true or real" relates closely to the Kuhnian definition of paradigm. For the aforementioned similarities, I turned to prior research on paradigm shifts to inform the parts of my study looking at changes in beliefs.

The work of Richard Bawden outlined three conditions for a paradigm shift that I drew upon in my design of interview questions and analysis of data. These conditions are: we need to know our own paradigm/s; we need to know about other options; and we need an appropriate shock as a stimulation for change (Bawden, as quoted by Bruzas, pers comm, 2018). This paradigm shift process is illustrated well in the work of Lisa Bendixen (2002). She describes epistemological beliefs as "beliefs about the nature and truth of knowledge" (Bendixen L. D., 2002). She then describes a four-step process of changing these beliefs that she observed in her research. Step one involves a "trigger." This step pertains to one's exposure to new beliefs,

personal realizations, and beliefs that do not match up with one's experiences. Step two involves the initial experience of doubting a pre-existing belief (e.g., confusion, uneasiness, a lack of stability). One then enters the resolution phase during which they can either take control of the doubt (e.g., reflect or seek to educate oneself about the initial trigger) or one can “surrender control” whereby turning to a higher power to gain understanding. Depending on the decisions made in step three, one can go down two paths in step four: develop new beliefs in response to the doubt brought by the initial trigger or reaffirm the original belief. This connection between a shock or trigger and the potential for a belief to change or be strengthened due to that shock is critically related to my project. The work of both Bawden and Bendixen look at how paradigm or belief change is a process involving multiple steps and multiple outcomes. The understanding I gathered from their work was pivotal in my preparation for this project.

Lastly, in preparation for this project, I reviewed the work of Franz Huber. Huber writes on the idea of varying degrees of belief saying, “Degrees of belief formally represent the strength with which we believe the truth of various propositions. The higher an agent’s degree of belief for a particular proposition, the higher her confidence in the truth of that propositions” (Huber, F., 2009, pp. 1). My work is a creative addition to these studies and builds upon their theories to incorporate narratives and lived experiences into an inherently personal experience with beliefs.

### **Methodologies**

“Narrative inquiry rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures” (Bell, J. S., 2002).

Throughout this project, the stories shared with me were listened to, reflected upon, and later compiled with seriousness and care. The individuals behind these narratives were not only interviewees but collaborative partners. The methodologies employed sought to incorporate the words and narratives of my research partners in such a way that honored this collaborative relationship.

### **Overview**

The aim of this project was to explore the process of belief formation, maintenance, and evolution in the Durban township of Masxha utilizing the narratives of Masxha residents. I spoke with participants to try and understand how their beliefs were developed and what factors have

promoted or inhibited them from changing their minds regarding specific belief systems over time. I used a qualitative interview approach for data collection and analyzed and presented that data via a personal narrative methodology. Ultimately, the data I collected was organized and presented in nine creative analytic pieces, structured in a narrative form, that all illustrate a different part of the belief development and evolution process.

### **Sampling**

When I proposed this project to the Local Review Board, I intended to, with a help of a trusted contact-person from Masxha, perform 3-4 preliminary interviews prior to deciding if I would select participants using age as a qualifying demographic. Upon beginning this project, however, I decided my only demographic requirements for participants would be age and place of residence. I interviewed eight individuals over the age of 18 who reside in Masxha. I decided against using other demographic requirements in my sample because I was not looking to do an analysis using demographics as a comparative factor in my final project. I wanted to employ the "show, don't tell" writing technique whereby I show stories as they were told to me and allow readers to develop their own understandings as opposed to analyzing and coding stories to ultimately tell readers what I see and what I feel should be understood.

Additionally, I began this project with the intention to utilize chain-referral sampling to select participants; this strategy asks participants to recruit future participants from the pool of people they know and so on and so forth. However, I ended up utilizing a convenience sampling approach instead. I began by interviewing two of the contacts in Masxha with whom I built a trusting relationship during my five-week homestay in the community. I then asked my main contact in Masxha if they knew of anyone in the community that would be willing to be interviewed. I trusted their recommendation because they grew up in the community and were knowledgeable about both the ISP process and the local culture and beliefs of Masxha; they were able to connect me with participants with a wide range of experiences. This method of sampling is not random. I chose participants who I felt would speak, at some length, about my topic and who would feel comfortable being interviewed by me in the first place. I have carefully considered the selection bias inherent to this method of sampling and the consequent lack of randomization. I am confident that the richness of the data and ideas gathered through my interviews outweigh the cons of such sampling bias.

Lastly, I interviewed eight residents all who live in Masxha, one of many townships or communities in Durban. While this group varied in employment status, age, gender, education, and religious affiliation, this sample is in no way representative of the Durban area. At the time of the last South African census in 2011, the greater Durban area, referred to as the eThekweni Municipality, had a population of 3, 442, 361 people (Stats SA, 2011). The population, experiences, beliefs, and ideas around the Durban area are full of nuance and are in no way contained or represented within the limits of this project. Rather, my research aims to serve as a glimpse into this intricate topic and beautiful complexity that the stories within it hold.

### **Interviewing**

My primary method of data collection was loosely-structured interviews; however, one component of these interviews that worked well for me was the use of erasure poetry as an introduction exercise and conversation starter. This form of poetry involves taking a previously constructed piece of writing and blocking out certain parts of the text; the only words left visible are those that resonate with the author. For this part of my interviews, I collected clippings of newspaper articles and randomly gave one to each interviewee. I then explained to them that this exercise was a way to get oriented in the interview space and discuss how we as individuals make sense of the news and information presented to us. Structuring this as more of a creative exercise and less of an interview component created a relaxed environment and opened the interviews up quite nicely. Rich Furman (2006) speaks to the use of poetry in qualitative research. He writes:

*The arts, which allow for expression of feelings that might not have previously been clear even to research participants, create a space for an interactional process of discovery. As such, engaging participants in arts-based research should not be a top-down process of gathering data but a reciprocal relationship in which insights are developed and shared (Furman, R. 2006, pp. 561).*

I found the use of poetry in the context of interviews leant itself well to the collaborative development and exchange of insights that Furman speaks to. Despite all eight participants providing consent for me to use their poems in some component of this project—at the time I was unsure how I would incorporate them in this paper—I have decided against this. In speaking with participants and reading the poems, I found that the

meaning of the poems they created was, at times, quite abstract to others besides the poet themselves. Because this form of poetry requires the poet, within the pre-established boundaries of the newspaper article, to critically analyze what *they* feel is important and meaningful to leave behind, it makes sense that the resulting poems were highly personal.

*The compressed nature of the poem forces the author to make decisions about what is essential. This is analogous to the data reduction process in both qualitative and quantitative research (Furman, R. 2006, pp. 561).*

After the poetry exercise, I conducted the more formal portion of my interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and the wording of questions was deliberately chosen to be as straightforward as possible while still remaining broad and open-ended. For example, I originally had a question that asked: "If you could make one recommendation to policy-makers to address polarization in South Africa what would it be?" I ran my original set of questions by a contact –person in Masxha and he suggested replacing the phrase "policy-makers" with "government" because referring to policy-makers may not resonate with some individuals in the community. Having questions that were phrased in a way that connected with the experiences of individuals in Masxha was crucial in getting rich answers that were true to their lived experiences. This focus on being concise and clear with my questioning was especially necessary with participants for whom English was not their first language. The interview guide I utilized can be found in **Appendix 3**. The interviews were loosely structured, allowing the interview to progress in the topical direction most pertinent to each interviewee. I wanted to avoid overly specific questions because I felt the nature of beliefs is not refined—the broader my questions, the more open the playing field for participants to tell their unique stories became. I recorded audio from these interviews on my personal cell phone which is password-protected. Immediately following the interviews, I transferred the audio recordings to a secure file on my personal laptop which is also password-protected. I then, within 48 hours of the interview, transcribed the recordings on my laptop. Both of these steps were carried out with participant confidentiality and anonymity in mind. No names were attached to titles on saved recordings or transcriptions, only an interview number—this addressed confidentiality and anonymity. I carefully listened back to the recordings multiple times throughout my writing process to ensure



the quotes and data I used were accurate. I have woven together my creative analytic pieces using data from all eight interviews has.

### **Creating the Story: pieces of a whole**

"Qualitative research depends on the presentation of solid, descriptive data, so that the researcher leads the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study"

(Janesick, V. J. 2000, pp. 390).

When I set out to write these pieces, I intended to use a personal narrative approach. Because of my own experience with belief evolution, I used journal entries, poetry I wrote throughout the semester, and my own belief narratives to do what I had been taught to do throughout this program: “write myself in” to the greater narrative. What came of this process is a series of short, snapshot-like stories, throughout which I tell parts of my own narrative as well as reflect on my experience as a researcher. The vulnerability that came with sharing my personal poetry and stories terrified me. I knew the value of including these narratives. I wanted to illustrate my own journey through beliefs in hopes of drawing connections to myself—my own life experiences are the only things I can speak to definitively—and portray the way in which my thoughts have evolved throughout this project. I reflect on John Steffler's (1995) words in thinking about the importance of including my own poetry in my project. "Poetry is, first of all, a state of mind. Before it's a verbal structure, it's a way of perceiving and interacting with the world, including oneself, one's own life" (Steffler, J. 1995 in Leggo, C. 2004, pp. 32). I chose to include my personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences in this project because of this idea. I wanted to illustrate my various states of mind and perceptions of the world throughout this project.

In addition to reflecting on my experiences of interviewing and gathering data, I interacted deeply with the words of participants. I annotated all transcriptions with my initial thoughts, questions, and connections between various interviews. I engaged with secondary sources including TED talks, journal articles, and examples of narrative-style research to inform my work and better understand the complex topic of beliefs. In some of these pieces, because of the descriptive story-like nature, I felt the need to include sections of explanation or analysis. I

initially tried to avoid putting too much analysis in these creative pieces to allow readers to make their own meaning. I ultimately used my explanatory paragraphs as a way to share with readers what the stories meant to me and what meaning I saw without making definitive knowledge claims.

In general, I am calling the stories written in this project “creative analytic pieces.” This label is derived directly from the work of Laurel Richardson (2000). Richardson describes “creative analytic practices” (CAP) as a style of ethnography that “displays the *writing process* and the *writing product* as deeply intertwined; both are privileged. The product cannot be separated from the producer or the method of knowing” (Richardson, L. 2000 pp. 930). It is my hope that, within this project, the tight connection between writer, writing process, and writing product is evident. I decided to slightly alter Richardson’s expression, replacing the word “practices” with “pieces.” I strive to employ the practices she describes—being *both* creative and analytic in my writing. Ultimately, in the context of this project, using the expression “creative analytic *pieces*” was the most fitting way I could describe the works that I produced. In my efforts to be both creative and analytic, I had to personally engage with my writing in a way I was not used to. I spent hours journaling, writing poetry, and asking myself questions about my moods, motivations, and connections to this topic. Through these acts of self-reflection, I was able to illustrate my personal connection with this topic and write myself into this ISP. These creative pieces are presented in a manner that illustrates—to the best of my abilities—the complex process of belief development that revealed itself throughout interviews. I chose to utilize a narrative approach because of the importance of narratives in the understanding of life and experiences. Through the progression of my pieces, I strived to portray the process of belief development as a story that not only moves with the progression of our lives but is also disjointed and chaotic. Full of gray areas.

I grappled with trying to define my approach to this ISP as *either* a personal narrative or an autoethnography and then to conform to my idea of what either approach needed to look like. I reflected deeply on the rich and highly personal nature of narrative analysis and consulted my peers, many of whom were struggling with similar internal conflicts. After a meeting with Clive, my advisor for this project, who told me to, “just let the stories tell themselves,” I felt much more comfortable existing in this gray area between personal narrative and autoethnography. He pointed me to the words of Ellis and Bochner that helped me through this writing process.

“...autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms—short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000 in Bruzas, C., 2018). I had to abandon my innate desire to follow what I’ve been taught to be the rules of research and let the stories tell themselves. Once I accepted this challenge, this new and highly personal approach, I found the stories did just that—they told themselves. The information lies in the words and the narratives, it became my job to present it.

### **Ethics**

*[There are] no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic ‘do no harm’ (Ellis, C. 2007 in Adams, T. E., 2008, pp. 175)*

As I developed my topic, crafted my research question, and conducted interviews, maintaining a high standard of ethical practice was my foremost priority. My thoughts on ethics unfolded into two categories: research ethics and narrative ethics.

### **Research Ethics**

My primary concern as it pertained to the ethics of this project was to never lose sight of my privilege as a researcher and the lives that were and will continue to be involved as long as these stories are read.

It is highly unlikely that this research project will have a significant, positive impact on the lives of participants; with this considered, I proceeded with my project with caution. First and foremost, in all interviews, I obtained informed consent. The informed consent document was submitted to and reviewed by the Local Review Board and approved with the proposal for this project. A copy of this consent form can be found in **Appendix 2**. I verbalized to all participants their constant right to stop the interview at any point, to withdraw any part of their responses from being used in this project at any point during or after the interview, and to decline to answer any question that I asked of them. I explicitly addressed privacy with participants as well, explaining the importance of only sharing that which they felt comfortable disclosing. I also described the nature of the ISP process—the display of my project in this written form and in an

oral presentation—and that their responses would be kept anonymous in both of these presentations. Upon confirming that participants had no question regarding the aforementioned, I obtained signatures from all participants on the informed consent document. I signed this document as well, committing to uphold its statements.

My decision to interview individuals with whom I had forged a relationship during my 5-weeks in Masxha was important to me. While at first, as described above, I wanted to use chain-referral sampling to recruit participants, something about speaking with strangers about their belief narratives didn't sit well with me. Despite the bias that was involved in speaking with people I already knew, I felt the personal connections I had—have—with participants helped address a scenario I think about often: researcher barging into community asking a bunch of questions and disappearing, never to be seen again. Zaner describes his belief that "*relationships are the centerpiece for ethics*" (Zaner, 2004 in Adams, T. E., 2008, pp. 178). I conducted interviews in the homes of participants. This came with its pros and cons. Pro: participants did not have to leave their homes and go to another location to conduct interviews. Con: this meant there were occasionally other people in the home who could hear what was being discussed in the interviews. As it would not be appropriate to request individuals leave their home for the sake of my interview, I suggested to participants we sit outside if they would feel more comfortable with that added layer of privacy. All declined. Two of my interviews were also conducted in the SIT office as part of an organized, paid session. SIT provided participants who attended this with a stipend—introducing another ethical consideration of paying participants—and all students interested conducted interviews around the office. While I isolated myself as best I could during these interviews, having other interviews going on in relatively close proximity infringed upon the privacy of participants. I again asked the participants if they were comfortable proceeding with the interviews given the nature of the office space and the other simultaneous interviews going on. Both participants I interviewed on that day agreed to proceed.

I also had to take great care to maintain privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality throughout this process. This included explaining to participants what these terms meant in the context of my study and how I would work to uphold them. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this study to protect their anonymity and maintain my commitment to upholding participant confidentiality. With all of these considerations made and actions taken, I can, and surely did not, account for everything. This ethical uncertainty is inherent in research involving

human "subjects"—there is no perfect algorithm in dealing with people. Parker sums this idea up well, encouraging researchers to embrace the uncertainty while noting that this embrace "does not indicate failure to of rule-and-principle-based reasoning; rather, it is a reminder of its limits" (Parker, 1990 in Adams, T. E., 2008, pp. 178).

### **Narrative Ethics**

I feel, given the narrative methodologies of this project, it was imperative for me to address the ethics of narrative inquiry. Narrative privilege is something I have thought about extensively. "We must approach personal narratives differently from how we would approach traditional, social scientific research" (Adams, T. E., 2008, pp. 183). This is a sentiment I considered at great length.

Who gets to have their story told and who gets to listen to stories? In this project, I, the researcher, had the privilege of listening to the stories of others. I have had the privilege of dedicating, first and foremost, an entire four and a half months of my life to travel to South Africa. This meant I could leave my family and job and community to do so. I then was able to spend financial resources required to execute this research. This type of experience would not be feasible for everyone to have. Am I more deserving of this opportunity than, say, the people I interviewed? Absolutely not. However, the privileges I hold as a middle-class, American, college-educated student allowed me to be sitting here writing this paper right now. Conversely, the eight participants in this project were able to share their stories with me, and consequently, anyone who will read this paper in the future. This, despite my failure to recognize it at the beginning of my study, is a privilege. Who gets to decide the stories that are heard? In this project it was me. While acknowledging the immense privilege I hold, I also need to be contentious of the responsibilities I hold as well. I am responsible for telling these stories with accuracy, depicting both the storytellers and their words in a way that is thoughtful and true. I am using the narratives told to me as a method of presenting a larger picture of beliefs. Adams (2008) speaks to this writing "narratives are also media (i.e., ways to (re)present life experiences)" (pp. 182). As the researcher and writer of this project, I am responsible for presenting, again, the stories that were presented to me. This requires me to be very sensitive in my work. In the construction of these narratives, my privilege and position as a researcher is not

one to be taken lightly. I have kept the words of Adams (2008) with me throughout the writing of this paper and consider them an essential component in the ethical execution of this project.

*When we lift a piece of life constructed on the page from its larger story, we separate it from its written, constructive conditions. This does not imply that we cannot use or evaluate personal narratives, but I believe that we must use a different sensitivity when working with life texts as compared to working with other forms of research” (pp. 183).*

### **Limitations of this study**

Due to its brevity and use of qualitative research methodologies, many limitations arose during the course of this research project. Firstly, the short, 3-week, duration of the research period did not allow much room for conducting multiple interviews with each participant. This component, had there have been more time, would have lent itself well to interacting on a deeper level with participants and their stories. In a limitless world of research, one that probably does not exist, I would have conducted multiple interviews with the same people and structured my questions in a looser manner allowing for a more natural and progression of storytelling—my interviews had to jump relatively straight in to the topic of beliefs in order to be considerate of the time sacrifices people were making to talk to me. Because of the limits around time (both in the greater context of creating this project and within individual interviews) and despite the already loosely-structured interviews I used, I feel this study was limited in reaching the full capacity of narrative inquiry. Bleakly speaks to this limitation that exists in the field of interviewing in general. Bleakly notes that there are “several potential problems with interviewing, such as stemming the flow of the subject’s talk so that the narrative is fractured, and bias in selection of which parts of the interview are reported” (Bleakly, A., 2005, pp. 537). Having more time to conduct interviews could have allowed participants more space to speak without breaking the flow of their narratives in an attempt to fit within the boundaries of the interview.

Another limitation of this study was language, more specifically, the fact that I only speak English. Because I wanted to conduct interviews without necessitating a translator—an attempt to minimize the number of mediums participant stories were filtered through—I could only interview individuals who had a conversational proficiency in English. This limited my participant pool to only include individuals with some level of education. Education, in various

aspects of my research, appeared as a factor influencing belief development and evolution. This is another example of sampling bias in this project. The participants were not randomly selected, and thus, the information obtained through interviews can in no way be representative of a greater context beyond the lives of those I spoke with.

The limitations inherent to qualitative inquiry furthered the inability to draw conclusions from this research. At the core of narrative research lies highly personal, individually meaningful, and richly informative information. Due to this richness, qualitative methods of inquiry, like those used in this study, not lend themselves well to the researcher making definitive truth claims. This is because, in writing about and *with* the narratives of others, researchers cannot, with an aura of factuality, state to *know* the experiences they are describing. In discussing the postmodern shift towards qualitative research, Laurel Richardson speaks to this saying, "Truth claims are less easily validated now; desires to speak 'for' others are suspect. The greater freedom to experiment with textual form, however, does not guarantee a better product...the work is harder. The guarantees are fewer" (Richardson, L., 2000, pp. 129). While this lack of guarantee characteristic of qualitative inquiry may, to some, be seen as a limitation of the methodology, I found the challenge in navigating the lack of truth claims paramount to my understanding of both my topic and narrative research as a practice. For me, this methodology ceased to exist as a limitation once I embraced it. However, I included it in the limitations section of this project because I, when operating under the desire to make truth claims, found narrative inquiries inability to produce definitive answers quite limiting.

### Who's The Storyteller?<sup>5</sup>

During this project, I had the pleasure of working with eight self-identifying Zulu individuals all who reside in the township of Masxha. Through the stories and experiences they shared with me, I was able to bring to life a research question that is so deeply rooted in the human experience. The eight participants—storytellers—who spoke life into this project were...

Ayanda, Sabelo, Bonisiwe, Siri, Sphe, MaNjomane, Mike, and Winnie.

You will hopefully come to know them a bit better through their stories.

While I now have the privilege of portraying these creative analytic pieces to you, the reader, I view the eight individuals above as your primary storytellers. I am the secondary storyteller—a middle person or "medium." Adams (2008) speaks to the role of a medium in narrative research. Adams discusses how, in being a narrative medium, one must be aware of the inevitable relationship between the author of the presented narrative and the story told by the primary storyteller. (e.g., I, as the author of this ISP, need to carefully handle my interactions with the stories to me by participants). "The form of a story affects an author's construction and an audience's interpretation of the story's content...we cannot divorce a medium from its content, audience, or authorial requirements" (Adams, T. E, 2008, pp. 182). I am cognizant of this role that I play. Telling stories, some of which are not my own, is rooted in my various areas of privilege, but is also full of responsibility. I have a responsibility to my research participants to convey their stories with truth and respect. I also have a responsibility to you, the reader to provide an accurate representation of the narratives I gathered in this process, so you are equipped to make your own meaning and personal conclusions through reading this project. Despite my active role as the author of this project, the stories contained within it would have existed, in sheer actuality, with or without me. This group of individuals is what makes *this* specific project what it is, without their stories my ISP could have been actualized in an entirely different way. I feel greatly honored and privileged to be able to share these individual's stories. These narratives form the foundation of this project, and I am thankful for their time, openness, and for entrusting me with their stories. This project would not be what it is without you all.

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<sup>5</sup> To preserve the anonymity of participants, all names used throughout this project in reference to participants are pseudonyms. Any relation one may see between a name used in this ISP and someone they know with the same name is purely coincidental. Each participant was informed of their pseudonym.



**Part II:**  
**Creative Analytic Pieces**

*“As one would predict, in people from such a widely varied backgrounds and experience, the manifest content of each narrative preserves individuality in all its contextual and internal richness and variation”*  
*(Chodorow, N. J., 2004 in Alexander, J. C., et al., 2004).*

### Where I Lie: Beginning

One of the last pieces that was created in the completion of this project was its title. Some, including myself, would say it was the most creative and analytic of them all. I struggled to think of a title that would, in some act of ultimate strength, encapsulate this project's topic in a succinct yet captivating manner. I sat beside my friend at her dining room table one night, unable to comprehend how, after writing over sixty pages about beliefs, I had such a weak grasp on the topic that I couldn't even give this thing a name. I felt more lost than I had during this whole process. But this all changed in a loud, sporadic conversation that brings me here, to this piece, the beginning to the end. Stick around to watch it unfold. *Believe* with me, imagine with me.

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I'm lying in a field—no, a pasture. I'm lying in a pasture. The grass is so green that it almost doesn't look real. I take a few deep breaths.....In.....out.....I settle in. I become increasingly aware of the grass beneath my body. It amazes me how supportive it feels. My foundation. I'd call this feeling comfort. My body, my mind, my ideas, my whole being, held up by this bed of grass beneath me. I look up at the sky now which, for the most part, is clear. Clouds roll through occasionally, briefly obscuring my view of the clear sky, taking away some of its warmth, some of its comfort. But the sun is strong today. The sky is almost completely blue, I close my eyes, and for a moment, picture a sky with no clouds. Bright, clear. I decide to lie here for a while, confident the gray clouds will pass, leaving in their wake a bright, blue sky. Clarity. I reach my arm out above me and imagine that I'm touching the blue background, giving me something to hold on to. A guide for what I'm supposed to be looking for in the first place, a reason I'm lying here in the first place. This is where I lie, in this pasture, on this grass, warm, full of hope. Clinging on to that clear sky.

### **It Takes a Village to *Teach* a Child**

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”  
(Proverbs 22:6, King James Version).

The process of learning beliefs is lifelong. As early as infancy, certain beliefs about the physical world are developed through observation. Take a belief in gravity for instance. Although a young baby has no explanations, they have experiences. I drop a toy. It falls. I cry. Repeat. And voilà, I believe. As one grows older, however, beliefs are developed through a process that increasingly involves a teacher-learner relationship as opposed to the experiential belief learning that the young baby engages in. Our families, teachers, and communities inform our ideas about the world and the way in which we navigate it.

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Think back to your earliest memories of having beliefs. What are those beliefs, where did you learn them, and who do you picture teaching them to you? We are taught certain beliefs before we can even comprehend the meaning of that word, *belief*. The learning occurs from an early age and from a lot of people. In my interviews, I asked participants to reflect on this process. This reflection was no easy task. Some let out a sigh as they tried to recollect, others repeated back to me, “you’re asking where I learned my beliefs?” I would reply with a nod and, in an attempt to provide reassurance, say, “yes, your beliefs...no rush, take your time.”

*It starts from my mother because the first teacher is the mother. ‘Don’t go to that fire, because you’re gonna be burned.’ So you have to listen and believe that you’re gonna be burned, not that you have to touch the fire first ‘til you get burnt. Believe it so you’ll be safe. That’s where it starts. She’ll stop me, ‘don’t do that! Don’t go to that pit, you’re gonna fall inside.’ It’s just like that (MaNjomane, pers. comm., April 12, 2018).*

*I was taught by my parents growing up a lot of the things we believe in, like the Zulu way. I observed. Every woman in the neighborhood is my mom. They have the right to slap me in the face if I’m being rude. But they also have the right to take me to the stores and buy something for me (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

*Sometimes we underestimate the role that your family plays. I think my family was strange. If you're middle class, your family is more likely to have a mom and dad. [As opposed to] If you're low-income, lower working class like the family I was born into on my mother's side. I had a small house and two shacks outside. I had my granduncles living there. They were not really old...they were these guys who were not really political activists, but they were watching these movies. Not just the movies that everyone was watching back then, like your Van Dammes or John Rambos, they were watching critical movies. Movies about politics. That influenced me from a young age to see things differently. I respected them, I loved them, I looked at them as my daddies. They would watch all these movies and I thought they were cool. I think it made it easy for me to be this kid who challenges everything. Because all the other kids were watching animated movies, I'm watching serious stuff. It was not because of my choosing; it was because of the environment I was in. What you're exposed to, in that little small house. And then my grand uncle, gogo's younger brother, he had a drinking problem. But he's the one who taught me how to speak English. He would wake me up, drunk, and give me a newspaper—six years old—in English. 'Read it!' And that's why I can read. So those are the kind of things that I went through that I don't think the next person had, even though we come from the same community" (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 7, 2018).*

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“It takes a village to raise a child.” At its core, this African proverb acknowledges the shared and largely communal task of parenting. The members of said “village” can range from parents, grandparents, and extended family all the way to friends, neighbors, and school teachers. This carries with it a sense of pride, but also a sense of collective responsibility. The beliefs of a child depending, in some ways, on the teachings they receive. The success of a child, even their potential struggles, are closely tied to what they are taught growing up (Hill, K. 2016).

Throughout this project, I began each interview with the question, “how did you learn your beliefs?” The conversations that resulted from this led me to try answering this query for myself. I realized my parents, their identities as Kenyans, my education, and the community in which I grew up all informed my current beliefs. They formed my village. They raised me.

I remember my mother's voice with vivid clarity now.

She would ask, "do you remember what the Bible instructs parents to do?"

I stare—halfway between her eyes and the floor.

"No."

"It says I must teach you children in the way you should go,  
so when you are old, you will not stray from it."

She grows somber here.

"Why then do you disobey me?" She asks.

I stare. This time, halfway between her bare feet on the carpet and my own.

She stares up.

"Dear Lord, have I now failed you?"

*-Robin Mwai (Journal entry, n.d.)*

### Religious Beliefs

*“For those able to embrace them, and for so long as they are able to embrace them, religious symbols provide cosmic guarantee not only for their ability to comprehend the world, but also to give precision to their feeling, a definition of their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it. (Geertz, C. 1966 in Pals, D. L. 2009, pp. 355).*

The time had come for my first interview, I was far more nervous than I expected to be. Unsure if I had the “right” questions prepared, I overcompensate with a nice spread of snacks. At least if the interview goes south there will be some post-conversation treats to soften the blow. I sat down to begin my interview, papers neatly organized with colorful paper clips. Notebook out, recording on. (I would confirm the latter at least ten more times during the interview. My belief in technology is a fickle one.) I began asking my questions. I explored, with my first participant Ayanda, what he remembers as his earliest beliefs.

*It’s weird. Being South African, even if you don’t go to church, you still consider yourself somewhat Christian in a way. You believe in Jesus; you believe in God. But I didn’t have that kind of regiment. My grandmother didn’t go to church, you know, so she didn’t force us to pray at night. We didn’t see her pray at night. But she will often say when she argues with someone, ‘God will teach you.’ So that’s how I learned of God (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 7, 2018).*

I didn’t know it at the time, but this idea Ayanda shared, Christianity as a fundamental part of the Masxha community, would become quite evident through the rest of my interviews. A few days later, immensely more relaxed, I met with Sabelo for my second interview. I begin with my first question. “How did you develop your beliefs or ideas about the world?” By the second sentence of his response, the conversation turned to his religious beliefs.

*My family is mixed religion. My granny is not Catholic. I grew up at my grandma’s house, which was near a Catholic church, that was where I was sent to go to. So I grew up around Catholics, although I didn’t go to a Catholic school. It was at school where I saw many different religions and beliefs (Sabelo, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

As he continued with his answer, I jotted down some notes in my journal. I was interested in why, despite my question asking about his beliefs and ideas about the world in general, his response focused on religion. At the beginning of my interviews with both Ayanda and Sabelo, I shared a brief explanation of my connection to the topic, how my beliefs around religion were developed and evolved. I began to question if this was a good idea.

“Does me sharing my story narrow question #1 to point only to religion? Ask Clive. Should I use a word other than “belief?” (Mwai, R., journal entry, April 9, 2018).

My third interview took place later that day with Bonisiwe. I decided to switch things up this time and not share my personal experience as a preface to the interview. I wanted to see if I was somehow influencing the answers I was getting. The interview began.

*I believe in God, yeah, I can't change that. Even when I have problems, I go and bow by my knees and I go and pray. And I know one day God will help me with this, and this, and this. Yeah. I won't change this. Because I know everything is happening because of [God]. After my mom passed away, I learned that we have to be strong. If there is no God, there is nothing gonna happen to your life. I believe that too much after my mom passed away (Bonisiwe, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

Again, I journaled about this response:

“Why does religion keep coming up? Is it a connotation with the word ‘belief’? Just inherent (in religious community?)” (Mwai, R., personal journal, April 9, 2018).

This journal entry, this deep desire to understand what was making religion come up when I asked about beliefs, speaks volumes. I was trying to answer a question; I needed a reason. I was ignoring the picture coming together right before my eyes. Even if I didn't understand why, the narratives people shared were revealing something far more important than a definitive answer. They illustrated details about lives, lived experiences, and what the idea of belief might mean within this community. Religion was not coming up because of me, because I was somehow placing an answer in people's minds by sharing my story. How arrogant an

assumption. Religion was coming up because, in the lives of those I was speaking with, it was their reality, their everyday ideas, experiences, and motivations. Religion was coming up because it formed their beliefs. I needed to take the stories I was hearing for what they were. Stories about lives and belief, not simply answers to a question.

*They used to tell us that whatever happens to you is because God is there. So if something bad happens to you, it's because God has allowed it to happen, but no one else can do something bad to you (Winnie, pers. comm., April 13, 2018).*

I now reflect on the quote from Geertz that began this section. Religion, for those who hold a belief in it, is a way to understand the world—the things that make you laugh, that make you cry, and the things that make you question your faith in the first place. Religion is not just another belief system. For some people, it is *the* way in which they make meaning. It is their foundation.

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I grew up Catholic, but if I'm honest, I did not really know other options were out there. I went to Catholic school, I attended Bible camp in the summer, I grew up in a largely Catholic community, and could literally see the steeple of my church when playing in my front yard. My belief in God is the earliest belief I can recall having. I, like most of the people I spoke with, would have mentioned religion when asked how I learned my beliefs about the world. Perhaps that is why I wondered if I was somehow influencing the responses of interviewees. I saw myself in the answers I was hearing. I wanted to run away from this. I wanted to be an "objective" researcher, but no matter how hard I try, my own beliefs will always shape how I receive and process information. This research, these stories, are not black and white. There is no objectivity in human experiences. It's the gray areas, those spaces between understanding and believing, in which we exist.



It's messy and confusing  
and family  
and faith  
and frustration.

What do you do when it's not black and white?

It's the gray area,  
the spaces between seeing and believing and seeing,  
that cause the most trouble.

I think about this now more than ever.  
My desire to understand—  
the beauty of the unknown.

So much to believe,  
so little time to make sense of it all  
How  
do I make sense of it all?

*-Robin Mwai (personal journal, April 24, 2018).*

### **A Mosaic: piecing together beliefs**

“We’re built of contradictions, all of us. It’s those opposing forces that give us strength, like an arch, each block pressing the next” (Lawrence, M., 2012, n.p.).

There is something quite magical about human complexity. The way our lives ebb and flow over time. The way we combine our experiences and then make meaning—*try* to make meaning—out of them. It’s mosaic. Pieces of information, experiences, and opinions coming at us from all angles. Falling together and becoming our unique version of reality. Our beliefs are formed in a similar way. We gather information, we hear stories, we live and learn, but sometimes that’s not enough to complete the picture. Sometimes, the individual pieces of what we are told to believe as well as what we want to believe, do not align. This can be disruptive. We have to take the information available to us and try to make sense of it all. We have to analyze the things that we hold dearest to our hearts and somehow piece together conflicting beliefs we hold within ourselves. What happens when your beliefs about culture, religion, and personal identity do not align? How do you make meaning out of that?

*There has always been a clash between Church and my family’s beliefs. My family believes in ancestors, which I don’t believe in anymore. My family slaughters cows and animals, which I feel is not a right thing to do, but they always have a way of justifying it (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

Siri speaks about her family justifying their cultural practices and this interests me deeply. I think about the relative nature of beliefs, how they depend, so greatly, on the context of the believer. For those who’ve come to hold a particular belief, the justification of it feels innate. For those standing on the periphery of a belief, it can be a challenge to understand. This becomes all the more challenging when multiple, perhaps contradictory, beliefs converge within your own life or community.

When I spoke with Sphe, I saw a dynamic between her belief in religion and her belief in Zulu cultural activities come to life. I found myself struggling to keep up with her train of thought. She would speak fast, pause to think, and then let out sighs of confusion as she discussed these two beliefs. I could see in her eyes that this was a complicated, messy task. She

was trying to put the various pieces informing her beliefs together; she was trying to create her mosaic.

*It's always a debate between religion and culture with us. With me, I say I'm full-on religion. I'm not gonna mix it in any way because you can't say one thing and do the other. Like, there are certain practices in each culture where they probably slaughter cows or they burn some incense, which I wouldn't do, and others will do. But they also say, 'we also believe in God and the Bible and everything.' They say that you need to do them both. They say God helps those who help themselves. But isn't that going against what the Bible says, to just serve one God? Because now it's like you are serving two gods. My culture says you have to slaughter certain things for the dead people. My religion says you don't do any slaughtering of any kind or any sort for the dead people. Depending on how you believe in the Bible, it contradicts itself. You're torn in between the two. Should I really do it or should I not? Those two really contradict each other. Culture says you must slaughter for the dead people but the Bible says something else, that you can't talk to the dead. And that's where it becomes, you know what, what do you believe in? For me, to make sense of it...I just don't understand. We are human beings; we need something tangible for us to believe in (Sphe, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

Developing beliefs takes hard work and thoughtful consideration. Individuals have to make meaning of so much information in order to develop a set of ideas about the world that resonates with them. Developing our own mosaics, our own pieced together set of beliefs takes diligence. It takes careful navigation through conflicts, both internal and external, in some attempt to make sense of it all. This process may be dissonant and convoluted, but this journey of learning and developing our beliefs is necessary. It enriches one's final, uniquely crafted, piece of art. It adds more pieces to the mosaic.

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It's ironic the amount of piecing together and internal navigation this project has entailed. As I write about developing beliefs, making sense of culture and trying to understand oneself, I find myself struggling with these very ideas. I want to write my story into these pieces. 'Be vulnerable.' I tell myself. 'Discuss your culture, your beliefs,

your identity.’ I reflect now on who I am and how I’ve created the mosaic of my life. I’m perplexed by this task. I was born in the United States, raised by Kenyan parents, moved to various cities throughout the U.S., moved to Kenya, and back again all while gathering pieces to shape my beliefs. Now, when I sit here looking at this page, trying to figure out what *my* culture and beliefs look like, I see all these pieces. I struggle to make them look coherent. In my mind, it all makes sense. Is that not the point of all of this? To us, in our minds, our beliefs make sense. Trying to get others to understand our beliefs is where things become difficult.

it's ninth grade now.  
we're reading Songs of Myself.  
i'm following along on the page.  
my teacher reads aloud.

“VERY WELL THEN I CONTRADICT MYSELF.  
(I AM LARGE I CONTAIN MULTITUDES)”<sup>6</sup>

it's like the lines leapt out of the page at me

i look up to see if i was the only one moved by this

as i struggle to understand myself here, now, on *this* page,  
i carry these words in my heart.

i keep writing,  
settle into the confusion, the contradictions in my thoughts  
i contain multitudes

*-Robin Mwai (personal journal n.d.)*

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<sup>6</sup> (Whitman, W. 1998).

### **Not All Beliefs Are Created Equal: beliefs and their relative strength**

“Hold on to what you believe in the light, when the darkness has robbed you of all your sight”

(Mumford & Sons, *Hold on to What You Believe*, 2009).

I sat down in a lecture hall that morning, my first ever college class. The professor turns to the chalkboard, and stretches to write "Approaches to Critical Thinking and Writing" so big that I can see it clearly all the way in the back of the room. He then turns to face the class and address his relatively captive audience. "This course will be full of discussions and debates. In-class participation will make up 40% of your final grade." When I hear this decree, I settle into my chair a bit. In-class debate? How hard can that be? He goes on, "I expect that when debating topics of controversy, you criticize the idea, not the person." I hadn't really thought about this before, this separation of person and idea. I began to analyze his words further, looking for a loophole in his argument. Are there ever instances when a belief is so strong, so intricately woven into our existence, this separation becomes unclear? Surely. Think of any social activist who has put their life on the line for their cause. It is hard for me to imagine Martin Luther King Jr. viewing his beliefs in civil rights and racial equality as separate from his sheer existence as a person. Dr. King once said, "Deep down in our non-violent creed is the conviction that there are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they are worth dying for." Our strongest beliefs and passions, the things that control our thoughts, opinions, and motives, are interconnected with our very existence of life. This literal *'til death do us part* connection to certain beliefs I continue to think about this now as I study the nature of beliefs. What is it about certain beliefs that make them so strong, so entangled in our very existence, that we stop viewing them as just any old idea? When do our beliefs cross the threshold from being what we think to who we are?

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When I interviewed Bonisiwe, we both stood. I was on the living room side of a wall cut-out separating myself and her; she was standing in the kitchen. She explained to me that she would need to prepare dinner for her family during our interview, and recommended I stand in the living room, thus, we talked through a deliberately placed hole in the wall. For the first half of our conversation, she was quiet. Her answers were quite short, sweet, and to the point. But

when I asked her about her strongest beliefs, the things she could never imagine changing her mind about, the conversation took off.

*When I have problems I know God doesn't answer now. I wait and things happen with time. I did, shame<sup>7</sup>, maybe seven times go to sangoma when I'm having problems with my boyfriend, go there. I think something's gonna happen. Hawu?<sup>8</sup> There's nothing. Then I try to say ok now let me stop doing this and this and focus to my God. If I have problems, I have to go talk to my God. So I know you won't answer me this time, but one day I know you're gonna answer me (Bonisiwe, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

Her strongest belief, the one thing she can never picture changing is her belief in God and His role in answering her prayers. This belief is strong and foundational. Through her experiences with traditional healers and her observation that they were not working in her life, Bonisiwe put her trust in religion. I saw a similar, unwavering, belief in religion in my conversation with Spe.

*Other things I can change, you know? But with religion I'm just too hard-headed. I would never change my religion. I think that was instilled in me, it's like second nature. I would never change it at all...With religion I grew up with it instilled in me in a deep, deep way. Since it was drilled in me, it's become second nature, but with other things, they are not so much as instilled. Like culture, cultural things or cultural activities at home we would never do. My religion opposes doing certain cultural activities. I've tried to do some cultural activities, I tried doing the muthi<sup>9</sup> thing. It just never worked out...But growing up, I would see my neighbors doing certain cultural activities but bad things would still happen to their families. So like, I don't see the point in doing something that's not very helpful. It either gets worse, it hardly gets better, it hardly does from my experiences and what I've seen. But with religion, it's always constant it's the same (Sphe, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

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<sup>7</sup>The use of the word 'shame' in this context is something I heard quite a bit while being in South Africa. I have heard it used to express pity, remorse, or general concern for someone or something.

<sup>8</sup> 'Hawu!' is an expression I have heard used extensively in South Africa, specifically Zulu communities, to express confusion, disbelief, or surprise.

<sup>9</sup> "Muthi" is a term that refers to South African traditional medicine practices. This can range from burning incense to communicating with ancestors with the help of a sangoma or South African traditional healer.

For both Sphe and Bonisiwe, their lived experiences, their processes of discerning what belief systems work for them and which don't, allowed them to strengthen the beliefs. This process of our lives and experiences forming connections to certain beliefs more than others is very interesting. Out of all the things one may believe, the beliefs rooted in personal decisions, experiences, and emotion tend to become the strongest. At least this was the case in my interviews with Ayanda and Siri.

*I believe in equality because, being a kid who was eleven years old in high school, I wasn't always treated equal. So I know from personal experience how it feels. I yearn for equality, and I know how it feels to feel like I am not equal to other people (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 7, 2018).*

*There's one thing I like about my culture, the virginity testing, I love that so much. Because it's not done in other cultures, it's done in ours, and it worked for a lot of girls. I think it's a good thing, it's one of the things I'm so proud of. I really think sex should be for married people, and virginity testing helps people. Your purity is something, so beautiful, you can never replace. You can replace a broken heart, you can replace a scar, but that, you can never (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

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I found this section the hardest to reflect upon and, ultimately, to write. Matter of fact, I considered leaving it out of the final version of this paper. When I initially wrote the interview question "what is something you would never change your mind about," I anticipated this yielding some of my richest answers—stories about long-standing beliefs and the fights people have gone through to defend them. What I actually heard were simple stories and relatively short responses across the board. This confused me. Something I thought would be so clear, proved to be anything but. Why were people's deepest, strongest beliefs, not spoken about with more vigor? I then thought about my own beliefs, the strongest ones. If someone were to ask me the question I asked participants, my answer, too, would be simple. "I would never change my mind about the need for equal rights and equity in all systems, laws, and institutions," I would respond. I hold this belief so strongly; I see it as a part of who I am. It's the ground that supports me. To



lose it would be to lose myself. Sometimes our strongest beliefs are the simplest to talk about, as simple as talking about ourselves. For the believer, they are a given. They are self-evident. On the outside looking in (as I, the researcher, was) the beliefs of others can be confusing. Unclear. I had to come to terms with this. I had to stop looking for clarity in something so intricate. There's beauty in the complexity of it all.

### **Where I Lie: Searching**

As I lie here, in this pasture, I grow confused. The sky, once so bright and clear, is getting away from me. The reason I lie here is getting away from me. The grass is beneath me still. Only now, the places where my body first lied have grown hard. It's like the grass is telling me I've overstayed my welcome. Like I shouldn't be here any longer. My foundation has altered. I grow uncomfortable now. And the clouds, once merely an inconvenience in my clear sky, have grown bigger. I feel like they're ganging up on me. The sun is still there behind the clouds though. It casts a shadow upon them making the clouds look gray from here. Everything is starting to look gray from here. I struggle to find my clear sky amongst these clouds, I search. Maybe, somewhere in all this gray, this mess, I can find something—a shape, some sun, some clarity. The clouds have grown more defined now, it's like they are getting comfortable in the place my clear sky once was. Staking their territory. I reach my arm out again, searching for something to hold on to, to remind me why I lie here. I search for clarity, and comfort, and warmth, and a clear sky. I fight, my hand searching for something to grasp, to protect my clear sky against these gray clouds. But I grow sad now, confused by all the gray, scared I may never see my clear sky again. I lie here, I keep searching, fighting, hoping for clarity.

do you ever wonder about the universe?  
the complex life out there  
all that we know  
all that there is to know

I've never felt so limitless

I think of life, unpredictable  
the future  
me, sitting here, writing  
I'm surrounded by a universe with no limits

I feel like I'm floating

this scares me  
I think about myself again

I reach out and grab this,  
tether myself to something real.  
who I am  
what I've done  
what I believe  
all that I know

I begin to put myself back together again  
re-member who I am  
in this universe,  
holding on to what I know to be true

*-Robin Mwai (personal journal, 20 April, 2018).*

### **Transcending Communities, Exposure to New Beliefs**

“...it may be important to offer students a perspective on their own immediate center of the world by enabling them to participate sensitively as cross-cultural sojourners to the center of somebody else’s world” (Batchelder, D., 1993).

The expression “transcending communities” comes up at various points in these pieces. I heard this phrase for the first time in my interview with Ayanda when we were discussing his exposure to new ideas. This exact quote from the interview is included later in this piece. From speaking with him and reflecting on this idea of transcending from one community to the next, I have developed a working definition of the phrase. Transcending communities is a term pertaining to the movement of people, culture, and beliefs across the lines of their native communities and contexts. This movement brings with it the potential for an exchange of ideas and beliefs.

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Picture yourself in grade school. Who is in your class? Who is teaching you and what are you learning? Picture the physical building. Think back to your daily commute to school. Did you walk? Did you take a car or bus? What do you see on your journey?

For me, this reflection yields very different images depending on which point in history I’m envisioning. There is a world of difference, literally, between what I am picturing as fourth grade Robin versus myself in seventh grade. I grew up in a small town in the middle of the United States. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: 6.21% African American and 86.69% white residents,<sup>10</sup> minimal diversity in any sense of the word. Ask anybody from that town and they will agree with me when I say the beliefs and ideas you encounter in Cedar Rapids are all relatively similar. Despite being raised in a Kenyan Household, my schools, sports teams, and church community did not provide me an opportunity to meet a diverse group of people or encounter a diverse set of beliefs. You could say I was sheltered. All this changed when my family moved to Kenya. I was 12 years old and terrified. However, despite my initial

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<sup>10</sup> Source: (US Census Bureau, 2016).

apprehensions, I am who I am today largely because of the two and a half years I spent there. I met people from all over the world, discussed religious beliefs that I had never learned about, and was able to formulate my own, new, beliefs and opinions.

This exposure to new ideas, my transcendence of communities, was a key catalyst in the evolution of my beliefs. I explored this narrative in my interviews. Curious about what factors helped individuals to develop new beliefs and question their prior notions of the world, I asked participants, “Can you think of a time in your life when you questioned the beliefs you held growing up?”

*It was at school where I saw many different religions and beliefs. So it had me going back to research what they believed. How does it intertwine or how does it differ [to what I believe]? It was with my classmates where they would come with their own experience and their own beliefs, and I would come with what I believe in. It would also be something that would clash. Some would say no ‘it’s not that, it’s this.’ It’s something you find really interesting, but a bit confusing though at times, where a person will tell you that this is what I believe. I come to my conclusions when I’m around people. Because if I’m here at home, people will tell me this is what you believe so you should just stick to this. But when I’m around different people from different religious backgrounds, that’s where I start having my own preferences and beliefs” (Sabelo, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

Ayanda shared a similar sentiment, highlighting the important role of school in the development of his belief and ideas about societal injustices. Talking with him, I could picture a young boy leaving his community, his place of familiarity, and transcending the lines of his own beliefs about his world.

*When I started high school, that’s when my beliefs changed. I remember the day Nelson Mandela came out, my grandmother threw me to the roof. I was all about that, but then quickly after that, it was like ‘boom’ It’s the transcending communities. Me being able to move from a small house in Cato to one of the bigger schools in Durban, and there was no curriculum about how governments should be run—it was just teachers off the record. It was more cultural—my cultural movement. My daily commutes, my cultural commutes on a daily basis. Now, I was in an environment whereby everyone was just openly like,*

*'oh the government shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be doing that.' So for me it was like 'wait, wait a minute these guys are being blasphemous.' But at the same time, it started making sense, in a weird way those were my formative years. I started coming back to the township and being like, 'wait a minute, why do they have clean roads and we don't? The dirt gets picked up next to my school every Tuesday. We pay the rates just like they do, but why are our services not the same? I had the questions, but at the same time, I had the answers. Going back home with that in my community...I started challenging the adults. It was always rough (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 7, 2018).*

It's not always easy to transcend communities like Ayanda and Sabelo did, it is especially difficult if you are being systemically segregated. Isolation, like that which occurred during apartheid, forces cultures, ideas, and beliefs to remain amongst those that are like them. I spoke about this with Winnie. We discussed the challenge of accessing higher education during the apartheid era when schools were legally separated along racial lines. As we talked, I learned a new term from Winnie: "amaBorn-Frees." She uses this expression to refer to today's generation of school-age children, the young South African's born free from apartheid and who are able to interact with communities, people, and beliefs other than their own.

*With these...what do you call them...amaBorn-Frees, \*laughs\* that's how I call them, born-frees. They don't know much. My daughter once asked me why I didn't attend a Model C school where I would attend with the whites, she was still young when she asked me that. I told her that we were not allowed. The next question was, 'who didn't allow you? Why?' I said, 'during the apartheid era, we were not allowed. We grew up in different times.' I remember when there was a course that I wanted to do, initially iteaching, it wasn't my aim. There was a course that I wanted to do, but that course was only offered at an Indian institution at that time. So in order for you to attend there, you had to get a permit for Pretoria. iPermit only came after school registration. They did it intentionally after registration was done. So rather than having a gap year, I decided to go and do iteaching. You see? It really wasn't easy. (Winnie, pers. comm., April 13, 2018).<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> In this quote, Winnie refers to "iteaching" and "ipermit." This placement of the letter "i" before nouns is a characteristic part of isiZulu grammar. Her use of "ama" as in "amaBorn-Frees" serves the same purpose for plural nouns.

Speaking with Winnie fascinated me. I imagined what it must feel like now, decades after the education system isolated her from learning with other students because of her race, to be a school teacher and educate students from many cultural backgrounds. She spoke with great pride about the opportunities that learners at her school have to expand their beliefs through talking to other students and teachers. Despite her transcendence of communities being hindered during her childhood, Winnie is now a catalyst for students to learn new beliefs and perspectives about the world. That, to me, is a step in the right direction.

Must I remind you the importance of a belief—it could make all the difference now.

When all is said and done,  
when the curtain closes—  
it's been the performance of a lifetime they'll say—  
what will you have to show for yourself?

You are bare now, naked.  
only thing separating you from the day you entered this earth is  
perched upon your shoulders.  
The things you carry,  
things you've seen,  
felt.  
How does it feel?

What is your heart saying now that no one's watching?

Whose life have you touched?  
What have you left in your wake?

Must I remind you the importance of absolution—it could make all the difference now.

*-Robin Mwai (personal journal, n.d.)*



### Remembering who you are

“There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change... You don’t ever let go of the thread” (Stafford, 1998, pp. 42).

The excerpt above comes from William Stafford’s Poem, *The Way It Is*. This poem goes on to discuss how, while you may explain your thread—your guide through life—to others, they may struggle to see and understand it. As I read this poem and reflected on the sentiments shared by some of the participants, I couldn’t help but visualize them clutching tightly to the threads of their families, their communities, and their identities. At the same time, I saw Stafford’s idea of others not understanding one’s personal thread come to life. Sabelo and Mike spoke to this with passion. When asked “what is something you would never change your mind about” both immediately mentioned their personal identity as an unwavering belief.

*My true identity...it's who I am and how I view myself. I cannot have someone, a third party, say how I'm to view or identify myself. I've known myself for the past twenty-five years...although sometimes my family will come in and say, 'this is who you should be.' As I've grown and had to fully understand how I view myself, and how I project myself, it has been my decision only. Although it won't be scientifically proven, this is what I see and show as my own true identity (Sabelo, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

*Just be myself. That's something I would never change...in this society, in this day and age, you'll find a lot people trying to change who you are, or you have to change yourself in order to hang around people...that's just not me (Mike, pers. comm., April 13, 2018).*

This idea of staying true to who one is is something I found people believe in with great strength. While this individuality is a strongly held belief, the development of this individual identity—who one is—can be a lifelong process; however, the beliefs, experiences, and opinions of others can inform and assist individuals in this process. I observed the influence of family beliefs on personal identity at various points during my Masxha interviews. Both community and individual identity are threads that make up the cloth of our lives; ancestors and family members pass the thread onto children through the beliefs and teachings they share. Perhaps this is why thoughts or beliefs standing in contrast to those one was brought up with can be frowned upon at best, acts of disrespect or betrayal at worst. When obedience to parents, adults, and familial

beliefs is expected, failure to do so is often not tolerated. Individuals whose identities or personal beliefs do not align with their communities may be chastised—with that, a pressure to conform<sup>12</sup>.

*I can never go back with my knowledge and information—they say I'm acting like I know it all, I'm acting like a white person all of a sudden. I'm acting like I'm better than them. I went to college, I'm coming back and telling them these things and they're like 'go to hell' (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018)*

*We are told, 'in this family because we are this surname and we are of this native group, this is how we as people of an African group or of this surname act' (Sabelo, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

These words from Sabelo strike a chord within me. I can picture myself, 6 years old, sitting in the living room at home. My father giving his keynote address to me and my older sister for what must have been the tenth time. "In this family, we tell the truth," he would declare. "In this family, we do not talk back, we do not give up." Those words, "in this family," hold more weight than comprehensible for a phrase so small. They can bring pride, an affiliation with something strong and defined—*this* family. They can also bring pressure. "We do not." Three short syllables that taught me, so powerfully, so definitively, lessons I hold to be true still to this day.

How difficult it must be, trying to strike a balance between being true to yourself and respecting the beliefs of your family. When these two aspects align, it can be beautiful. When they conflict, individuals find themselves at a pivotal point between following their own beliefs and staying true to the teachings of their families. The social collective—one's family and community—play a powerful role in forming the individual. If the individual is a culmination of collective teachings, despite how unique their beliefs become, can they ever be separated from their roots? Or do the roots just expand, elongating the thread of experiences and ideas to be passed on for generations to come? (Triandis, H. C., 1995).

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<sup>12</sup> "Conformity orientation refers to the degree to which family communication stresses a climate of homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs" (Koerner, A., Fitzpatrick, M. A. (2002).

Put trust in confidence

once again.

Hope,

negativity—inspired history.

Collective memory.

Changes unfolding to rid our minds.

Reaffirm

belief.

Future—

live in it.

Former being recalled.

*-Robin Mwai (personal journal, March 12, 2018).*

### A Word to Children on Questioning What You're Told

“Some things that I’m told, I have to see for myself if it’s true or not...my first question all the time is, ‘who do you know that something like that happened to?’ And people just freeze”

(Mike, pers. comm., April 13, 2018).

Manje ke lalela la mntanami, uma ufisa ukubonakala njengomntwana oziphethe kahle, kunemithetho okumele uyilandele. Kulula. Konke okumele ukwenze ukulandela lezinyathelo.

*(This phrase, written in isiZulu, roughly translates to:*

*Now listen here my baby, if you want to be considered a good child, there are some rules to guide you. It’s simple really. All you have to do is follow three steps.)*

#### STEP 1. Respect your elders.

*The minute you utter a word of... ‘I don’t think this is how I should be doing it,’ ooohh, you’ll hear it from my gran. Because she’ll tell you, no. you do not talk back to her or any other adult person” (Sphe, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

*[This generation], they do their own things, they’re too modernized. The way in which we grew up, you couldn’t ask an elderly person so many questions. If they tell you this, you believe it (Winnie, pers. comm., April 13, 2018).*

#### STEP 2. Don’t ask questions. Do what you are told.

*I wasn’t taught to be able to express myself as often as I should. Because if I would express myself it was considered as being rude. Like you don’t care about what you’re being told. You’re disrespectful. You grow up doing the same things, but you’re not learning things by yourself (Sphe, pers. comm., April 10, 2018)*

*People that don’t believe what Cato people do are out there, but you don’t say it. You just think about it but don’t verbalize it. You don’t say, ‘I don’t think this exists.’ You don’t do that with our culture. You don’t say ‘I don’t believe in ancestors, ancestors are this, this, and that.’ Girl, you’d be beaten to death! You can just keep quiet. If you don’t believe in something, don’t say anything, don’t say anything about their beliefs. Don’t say anything about their culture—you have no say” (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

**STEP 3.** Honor your community.

*Where I come from, Chesterville or Cato, you defend fellow black people. Whether they're in Parliament, whether they fuck up, whether they're priests, you defend them. Especially in front of other races. You don't criticize, Well, you criticize or complain, but amongst yourselves (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 7, 2018).*

You don't need to see to believe.

Just believe.

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Throughout multiple interviews, I observed a deeply interwoven narrative. Children are to believe what they are told. Whether that is about religion, or behavioral expectations, or Zulu culture; questioning what your elders tell you is not accepted. When the time comes in one's life when they decide to question what their family taught them to believe, what will happen to these learned lessons? The idea of a "good child," how that child should behave and what they should believe in, is so intrinsic to one's community beliefs and identity. By assigning certain behaviors and ideas a label of "good," a dichotomy is born. A complementary question arises. What, then, is "bad?" Is it bad to believe something new or, God forbid, to hold feelings of disbelief against what you are told? I remember being a child and thinking it was all black and white. There is a good and a bad and, so help me, I better be on the right side of the line in the sand. There was no gray area. As I deepen my understanding of beliefs, I see how much pressure there is to believe the *right* thing. I realize how much pressure was put on me growing up to believe the *right* thing. Challenging the beliefs of your community is no simple task. Perhaps that makes believing without question the easier choice. The "good" option.

To defend is to  
challenge.

Any attempts to move  
after the legitimate battle against Trust.

The body  
and  
the owner.

For this purpose.

The process of opening, it was difficult.

How long the case would take to complete.

*-Robin Mwai (journal entry, April 10, 2018).*

### Changing Beliefs

“The world we see that seems so insane is the result of a belief system that is not working”  
(William James).

As I sit here writing, I think about the three conditions for a paradigm shift that Richard Bawden speaks of. Condition three, “we need an appropriate shock as a stimulation for change,” sticks out in my mind (Bawden, as quoted by Bruzas, 2018). Shock. Changing one’s mind, changing a belief, is not a passive process. It is deeply personal, reflective, confusing, perhaps shocking. What fuels us to change our minds? What provides a shock sufficient enough to shake us from where we stand. To change our beliefs?

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Education:

This is a privilege. This is a vehicle for accessing information and ideas. New knowledge can be shocking. It can be uncomfortable to uncover information that contradicts our beliefs.

*In college, I started doing law, and I started knowing how the actual Bible was written. I’ve often wondered how everything came to be, so when I went to law school, it gave me a decent idea of how the bible was written. It gave me tools to even question. Religion, which played a big role in my identity because I would pray at night even though I didn’t go to church, I started questioning when I was in college. I started questioning everything, to the point where I don’t even consider myself religious. Even though sometimes when shit hits the fan, \*laughs \* I do pray (Ayanda, pers. comm., April).*

A shift over time:

This can be the subtlest way that beliefs change. Someday, perhaps without you even knowing, the way you view a topic has evolved. Your belief is now something new, something different. You may look back on what you believed at a prior point in your life and reflect on how your belief has altered. The shock responsible for this may be gradual, but critical nonetheless.

*I think I always believed a woman should be...if you're regarded a respectful woman, you should bow down to everyone. Have no word. No female voice. I always believed in that. Just defined a woman as someone who's down to earth, who doesn't object to anything, someone who wears skirts, someone's who's conservative. Skirts, staying at home, no drinking, no nothing. As I grew up, I was like 'I'm a woman, I know my values, I've been taught a certain way, I've been raised a certain way, but I can still do things I'm comfortable doing myself.' Like having that thought that women are supposed to be like this, I was just like, 'no this is not it.' I've seen my grannies live like this, I've seen my aunts live like this—submissive and just powerless. I grew up and was like no. I don't want to be that woman. I don't want to be. If it means I'm not a cultural woman, a Zulu woman, then I'd rather not be (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

#### Gathering information:

“If you encounter a fact that conflicts with your beliefs, you revise your beliefs. But what is a rational way to make such a revision?” (Walsh, C. R. & Johnson-Laird, P. N., 2009). Gather evidence. Sort through it all. Add up the facts. Revisit your beliefs, how does this new information affect them? The result of this, depending on which direction your newly acquired information takes you, may be a change in belief.

*Witchcraft. I believed in witchcraft because my family taught us that there was witchcraft, it's real. \*whispers\* I don't believe it, at all. There's a woman that used to live near us that they called The Witch. They said she practiced witchcraft...ok, let me tell you what made me change. For a while she had cats, she didn't have kids. When you're older, you have like sleepless nights, so she would get busy at like 4 am. Start cooking, she doesn't have a time; she's old, she's illiterate. For a while we looked at her, she had a nose like from the books and the movies that portray witches. So my whole life I believed that woman was a witch. Until she died, and nobody buried her. Only a few people. It was like witchcraft was real. Everything that happened, people having legs grow big, and heads, just like having migraines, they believed it was her. For a while, the whole community believed she was a witch. So then I realized, two years later, my granny is old. She's 95. At 93 people start saying she was a witch because she's old. Why is she not dying when all the other ladies are dying? Then it hit me. Then I saw everything that I thought that made sense. So I looked in my granny's closet, under the bed. Listen. Every night my granny started having sleepless nights too. I would say, 'eh, where do you come from?' she's like, 'I just come from the toilet.' Because I was raised to believe there is witchcraft and this is how they behave, I started seeing my granny behaving like a witch, and I'm like, 'okay, maybe she could be a witch.' Then when I started*



*looking for the animals and muthi. My granny is Roman Catholic, she didn't have none of that. Then I was like, 'okay well, maybe there is no witchcraft. Maybe there is no witch.' So I don't believe in witchcraft anymore (Siri, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

As I sit here writing, I reflect on these shocks that may flip someone to believe something new. I think about Siri for a long time. Her belief in witchcraft, her grandmother. I think about the way her voice got quiet as she spoke. I picture the way she must have felt, hearing people equate her grandmother with something she believed to be so evil—supernatural. I think about this word *supernatural*. (adv.) “relating to things that cannot be explained according to natural laws.”<sup>13</sup> I wonder if beliefs could, in some ways, be supernatural—as I’ve gone through this project this possibility has become more reasonable. I think about Siri again, how shocking of an experience this must have been, how this shocked her eyes open to reassess her prior beliefs. I’m fascinated by this process. How the timing and context in which we receive information can affect the way we respond to it. I wonder what she would believe today had this shock never happen. I can only imagine.

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<sup>13</sup> Supernatural [Def. 1]. (n.d.). In *Collins English Dictionary*.

**Where I Lie: Evolving**

As I lie here, I begin to move a bit. The grass I began this day upon has proven unfit to last me through the changes in my sky. I've relocated now. Found myself a patch of lush, green grass upon which I find *new* comfort. It supports me. I lie here. I gaze at the sky above me. It is more gray than ever before. I say goodbye to clarity I once clung to for dear life. I was taught to do this. To lie in the grass, the comfort, and to never let go of clarity—they told me if I looked hard enough I would always find it. But now the clouds have waged war on my clear, blue sky—they've won. I look up at the clouds, and the sky, and I can still feel the warmth of the sun on my skin. I did not expect this. I always thought the gray would be cold and scary and uncomfortable. Unsuitable for inhabitation. I was taught to believe so. It has proved me wrong. I lie here, looking up at a blanket of gray. I reach my arm up, looking for something to hold on to. Something to grasp. I try and hold on to the gray, but it's not ready for me yet. *I'm* not ready for it yet. So I just lie here, hand stretched out in front of me. This hand, this tool that I'm writing this piece with, the last thing between me and the gray.

It's startling—  
scary at times.  
when the ground you've lied on  
betrays you.

questions I never knew I had  
beget answers  
beget questions.  
my head—my world—  
spinning.

I know why they say ignorance is bliss now.

what do you do with this new found knowing  
when the ground on which you lie develops  
cracks its surface  
when what has supported you turns its back

What will you hold onto to save you?

*-Robin Mwai*

### **Conflicting Beliefs and the Strength with Which We Hold Them**

“It’s the land issue, it’s the race issue, it’s almost everything. South Africa is a very polarized society” (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).

I was asked once why this research topic matters, why it is important to study beliefs in the first place. At the time, this question surprised me. It made me pause for a while. I knew why I *liked* this topic, why belief development as a process fascinated me. But why did it matter? What takes this topic from something cool to learn about to something with real ramifications in our everyday lives? To answer this question, I had to use my imagination.

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I am imagining myself in Johannesburg, sitting in Constitutional Court, surrounded by four local friends. They convinced me to come here today, said I needed to see the big picture. Court is almost in session. I lean over to Ayanda, trying to understand the case that we will be hearing today. He proceeds to fill me in.

*It’s the land issue, it’s the race issue, it’s almost everything. South Africa is a very polarized society. Yes, apartheid has a legacy to do with that, and most of the time when people want to raise issues, they reference apartheid, so it still is dividing us. Even our very idea of apartheid, what it was and what it meant is polarized (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).*

It is clear to me now that this is no ordinary day in court that I am imagining. It’s a battle of beliefs. Whoever holds on the tightest, defends their beliefs with the greatest tenacity, will be victorious. These beliefs are all positioned on signs in the middle of the room. The people arguing to support their ideas stand on the periphery. I turn and look at Sabelo. His face looks frustrated and exhausted. I ask what he is thinking about, and he sighs, rolls his eyes, and stares at the judges seated before us.

*They debate a lot. It’s the laws of society. Someone will say ‘these laws of society are going against my beliefs. Why are they allowing things like that, why are they restricting*

*that?’ Many people debate about it, and sometimes these debates happen, and they turn to wars. The crux of it is laws (Sabelo, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

I ask Sphe what she thinks about all of this, what her opinion is on the debates. Her voice gets shaky. She is passionate as she immediately talks about her beliefs regarding the land debate in South Africa. We had talked about this extensively a bit earlier. “You can’t just take someone’s land when the constitution that you guys made...” (I imagine her pointing down to the judges) “...says that if I have certain documents pertaining to my land, you can’t just come and take it! Regardless if I’m white, black, Indian, or Coloured. So now those are fights that are happening. That keep on happening. Sometimes it unites political parties because some of them see eye-to-eye, some don’t” (Sphe, pers. comm., April 10, 2018).

I whisper now. I wonder, in the midst of all of this, if there is a right side to fall on. The debate is getting heated and there is no end in sight. This worries me. As the argument pings around the room, people on all sides of the issues stand at opposite poles from one another, I wonder when this will be over. I look at on everyone’s beliefs, so strong and important to them, placed in the middle. A barrier has been formed. I wonder how they will ever see eye-to-eye. I turn to Winnie now, hoping she will have some words of optimism.

*I don't think there will be anything that will solve [these issues]. Whatever issue that comes up, you'll find that there is a hidden agenda. That people want things, they have certain interests. It's interest and greediness because if I want something to be done my way, at the end of the day, it's because I know there is something I will be getting—it's for personal gain. And nothing will ever come right, because whoever is leading, whatever organization, has his or her own personal interest (Winnie, pers. comm., April 13, 2018).*

As I listen to Winnie and continue observing this debate, I start to see why I was brought here today, the big picture I am supposed to see is forming. They brought me to illustrate strong beliefs in action. I reflect on what I’m hearing in this courtroom, the issues that brought everyone here in the first place. I think back to that question I was asked about why this topic matters. I am looking down at the answer. Our beliefs shape

our reality, but they also inform the way we interact with the world. They can go up sturdily like walls and if we let them, they can stand strong throughout our whole lives. As I sit in this courtroom, I wonder about beliefs and why they matter. How they are beautifully made and uniquely held. I also think about their power. They can unite or divide. They are strong.

As we leave for the day, having seen a display of strong beliefs and even stronger defense of those beliefs, I ask one final question of the group. “If you could do one thing to address what we saw in there, to help people in South Africa see eye-to-eye, what would it be?” What I heard in responses became the most alarming parts of the day.

*“it’s impossible, I doubt it will ever happen.” (Sphe, pers. comm., April 10, 2018)*

*“It’s something that would need us to delegate on. They should not be just making decisions on their own and then throwing laws at us. It must also involve us as they people. You find out many people also have thinking skills to give the government. It gives us a platform to express ourselves...it’s an ideal world I am living in with that. I don’t ever see it happening” (Sabelo, pers. comm., April 9, 2018).*

*“South Africa is fucking impossible...Policy makers, media, churches, any stakeholders, focus on the education system in South Africa. Then we’ve fought half the battle, that needs to be fought. I feel the education system is letting everybody down. It’s the crux of everything” (Ayanda, pers. comm., April 7, 2018).*

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Perhaps it is because I have now written the word belief 187 times (188) that I have grown more aware of the gravity of this situation. I see now, more than ever, how the strength with which we hold our beliefs can be a double-edged sword. On the one end, our strongest beliefs can give us passion, something to stand up for, or a purpose to guide our lives. On the other end, if we are not careful, —often we are not—our beliefs can come between us and

understanding those around us. They can hinder our willingness to entertain new ideas because we view our own beliefs fact. Our beliefs form the foundation upon which meaning is made; it makes sense to want this to foundation be strong. I try to remind myself of these multiple ways that my beliefs can be used in my life. I hold my beliefs tightly and close to heart, but I keep my mind open to new perspectives and ways thinking. This openness to new beliefs played a critical role in the development of this paper.

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I continue to reflect on this project. I reflect on my beliefs about research and my beliefs about this project, and I think about how my pre-established beliefs played a role in all of this. As of now, knowing what I know, and not knowing what I don't, this is reflection is the best I can do. I can reflect on where I began and where I am now. I know, with a certainty I can only have about my own experiences, that my beliefs have changed. I am unsure when along this ISP process it happened—perhaps somewhere in all the gray areas I've been finding—but things are different now. I can feel it as I write.

**Where I Lie: The Gray**

As I lie here, I realize it is much later now. The earth below me has molded to accommodate my presence—it holds me up as I lean into it for guidance. This grass, my foundation, has changed with the passing of this day. Admittedly, it looks similar to my initial resting place, it serves the same purpose too. But this grass is different now. It's wider and softer—less sharp edges controlling where I can move comfortably. And I'm happy here. Now. Once more, I look up at the sky. As the night approaches, I try to look up and find my clouds. They are not there any longer. I wonder where they went—I never was quite able to grasp them. I close my eyes and remember the clouds, the gray, the warmth I felt, the time I spent watching them. I grew to love them. I close my eyes tighter now. I want to understand the clouds deeper. I imagine myself holding the gray clouds tightly. I imagine the beauty of this day. I remember the journey. I open my eyes now—slowly. I reach out my arm and look for something to grab on to—I can't see my hand anymore. The air is thick. Gray. It surrounds me. It is everywhere now. But I am comfortable. I am warm. I am happy. I am lying in it.



### **Conclusion**

“So, my friends, I can only extend to you thoughts of encouragement and inspiration. Go forth with your endeavors to raise the consciousness of all your people to the best of your abilities”  
(Steyn, C. 1994).

As the process of completing this project nears its end, I reflect on my beliefs more critically than ever. I think about the way certain beliefs have developed, the ones that have wavered, and those that have remained steadfast. I reflect deeply on what I have learned, how my own beliefs have been affected by this process, and my thoughts moving forward. Above all this, I reflect on the stories I have had the privilege of hearing and sharing, and I wonder where to go from here.

### **What I have learned**

If you recall, I began this project with three objectives: to understand how people learn their beliefs and assign them relative strengths, to learn about how people change their beliefs over time, and to understand how the strength with which individuals hold their beliefs may factor into debates currently going on in South Africa. At the time, I thought these objectives were relatively simple and straightforward. As this process has gone on, each of these objectives has proven to be multifaceted and highly nuanced. Something I have come to understand more through completing this project is the intricate web of influence that makes up our beliefs. I always acknowledged the role of parents, family, and community members in the formation of beliefs, but this process revealed the many gray areas of the belief learning process. I now see some of the many strings attached that pull on an individual as they try to make sense of what they are being told to believe and what they themselves want to believe. There is no guidebook to help with this process. Navigating the process of belief development can only be *fully* understood by living and experiencing it within the context of one’s own life. Despite my having lived through this experience, as anyone who has developed their own beliefs has, I seldom reflected on the various steps of the process until now. In the Masxha community, one I have observed to be rich in culture and beliefs, the act of developing beliefs was far from black and white. The interviewees in this study shared with me their experiences navigating all of the information informing their belief systems. Their willingness to do this was essential in my work

to better understand the process of belief development. While their stories allowed me to deepen my understanding of belief development and evolution, I in no way claim to fully understand their experiences. Through their stories I gained insight into the complexity of their lived experience. Because of this complexity and the brevity of my time working on this project, I have had to come to terms with the gray areas. I had to accept that this project would not come together with a nice, neat bow on top. This was the biggest challenge I faced in completing my ISP.

Objective two, learning how people change their beliefs over time, proved to be the most difficult of the three. Perhaps that is because, in practice, this is a difficult task to complete. I now understand more about the pressures one may face to maintain certain beliefs. I learned this through my interviews and through my own introspection into my belief changes over time. Until now, I had never thought critically of pressure to appease one's family as such a strong push factor towards certain beliefs versus others. My interviewees revealed to me how difficult it can be to try to change a belief amidst influences from family and community members. This part of my project was riddled with gray areas, however. I am still grappling with the complexity of belief change within a pre-established community identity, and how those two factors work with or against each other. Some interviewees chose to defy certain community ideas in pursuit of a more individualized belief system while certain community beliefs have stuck with them throughout their lives.

This brings me to objective three. I wanted to learn about the big picture of beliefs. This was challenging. While shared beliefs may be similar in nature, the way each individual experiences and understands the beliefs they hold is highly idiosyncratic. This deeply personal connection to certain beliefs and not others illuminated how beliefs may be involved in the greater context of South Africa's social and political climate. This was an area of my study that I anticipated bringing rich ideas and thoughtful social commentary. What I observed when speaking with individuals about the role of beliefs in the greater societal context was a tone of discouragement. All participants spoke about beliefs so highly when the focus was on their own lives and experiences; however, when I zoomed the lens out to include government and policy-makers, responses cast a new light. In processing this, I feel the strength with which we hold our beliefs makes it hard to understand them from an outside perspective—even more so if the "outsider" and the "believer" hold contradictory beliefs.

### **Recommendations for further study**

There are many gaps in my understanding of the development, evolution, and maintenance beliefs that this project did not, and could within its limits, begin to broach. Thus, I feel this topic would benefit greatly from further study, especially as it pertains to the questions regarding belief development and evolution that I pose throughout this paper. I recommend:

1. Researchers develop, questions, approaches, and methodologies that take into consideration the highly personal and intricate nature of beliefs. This is including, but not limited to utilization of qualitative methodologies, consideration of narrative ethics and, the portrayal of beliefs in a way that discusses their innate complexities.
2. Future researchers to discuss, in more depth, the “gray areas” explored in this paper. Can you research a topic like beliefs without acknowledging, or even existing in, these spaces of uncertainty?

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### **My own beliefs during this project**

The evolution of my own beliefs, I hope, was portrayed in my title. “What Lies in the Gray” came to me in my final days of editing this paper. At the beginning of this semester, I held on to the paradigm of western research I was operating within with great strength. It was my foundation and I felt comfortable standing upon it. I believed research had to be objective, focused on seeking an answer to a question, and above all else, “scholarly.”<sup>14</sup> While the Research Methods and Ethics course I took this semester opened my eyes to the value of qualitative inquiry, I believed only a professional writer could effectively convey data and findings using qualitative methods. In short, I did not think I was cut out for this in *any* way, shape, or form. I did not see how I was going to explicitly answer my research question by writing a narrative. The gray areas of this project were anxiety-provoking. When I would meet with my advisor, Clive, and express these concerns and anxieties, he would remain very calm and tell me to just “let the stories tell themselves.” He, clearly, knew something that I did not. At the time, I felt

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<sup>14</sup> I use the term “scholarly” to refer to an additional set of criteria regarding what constitutes real research. “Scholarly” can include: taking place at a formal institution or lab, being conducted by educated individuals (scholars), etc.

discouraged and destined for ISP doom. I remember walking out of Clive's office, having written over half of this project already, and saying, "there is something on these pages, whether it is *actually* an ISP, I can't say for sure." Clive chuckled and told me we would find out soon enough.

However, through conducting interviews, writing this paper, and reflecting in great length on the way I have felt about this project over time, I have experienced, with deep emotion, a change in my beliefs. I see the value in my work. I can confidently say I wrote an ISP. This project is not about finding a solution to a question, but rather, it was about deepening understandings of certain aspects of belief formation and evolution. This project was about deepening relationships with others, learning from each other's narratives, and showing the complexity of the belief experience.

The first creative analytic piece of this project describes me sitting at a table frustrated with my inability to give this paper a satisfactory title. This twenty minutes of ranting at the dinner table made all the difference. I shifted my beliefs. I, a student operating within a limited, western paradigm of research conducted a creative analytic form of inquiry. This resulted in a set of responses, all of which were rich in nuance, and only *fully* comprehensible to the storyteller. In trying to place this project within the parameters of my initial beliefs on research and bring it to a uniform conclusion, I was overlooking the gray areas as a potential opportunity for learning—I saw them as a roadblock, something to get over en route to my conclusion. As I sat at that table venting about all of this, it hit me. The title, this project as a whole, came to its final form once I believed in the value of these gray areas—the incomprehensible. I had to accept that, in all actuality, I cannot make any definitive or generalized knowledge claims after completing this project. That is okay. I can, however, show the reader these gray areas, these points where human complexity takes its fullest form and represents the nature of lived experiences. Life is complicated, people are complicated, beliefs are complicated. This project taught me to learn *with* this complexity not *despite* it. This project taught me to believe in the value of the gray areas and to celebrate it. This has taught me, above all else, to lie in the gray.

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**Appendix 1: Local Review Board Approval**



**Human Subjects Review  
LRB/IRB ACTION FORM**

<p>Name of Student: <i>Robin Mwai</i></p> <p>ISP Title: <i>Factors promoting or inhibiting one's willingness to change their mind in the context of everyday issues in the lives of South Africans.</i></p> <p>Date Submitted: 23 March 2018</p> <p>Program: Durban Community Health and Social Policy- Spring 2018</p> <p>Type of review:</p> <p>Exempt <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Expedited <input checked="" type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Full <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Institution: World Learning Inc.                  IRB organization number: IORG0004408                  IRB registration number: IRB00005219                  Expires: 30 June 2018</p> <p>LRB members (print names):                  John McGladdery                  Clive Bruzas                  Robin Joubert</p> <p><b>LRB REVIEW BOARD ACTION:</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved as submitted  <input type="checkbox"/> Approved pending changes  <input type="checkbox"/> Requires full IRB review in Vermont  <input type="checkbox"/> Disapproved</p> <p>LRB Chair Signature: <i>[Signature]</i></p> <p>Date: 23 March 2018</p>
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**Form below for IRB Vermont use only:**

**Research requiring full IRB review. ACTION TAKEN:**

\_\_\_ approved as submitted \_\_\_ approved pending submission or revisions \_\_\_ disapproved

\_\_\_\_\_  
 IRB Chairperson's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

## Appendix 2: Consent Form

# SIT Study Abroad

a program of World Learning



### CONSENT FORM

#### 1. Brief description of the purpose of this project

The purpose of this project is to look at the process that individuals go through when coming up with their beliefs. (Where do they learn their beliefs, from who, at what time in their lives, etc.). I also want to gain an understanding into how these beliefs change over time and what makes certain ideas, opinion, and/or beliefs last longer than others. This project will involve a recorded one-on-one interview that is focused around sharing of stories regarding the above topics. During our interview, I will be asking a few questions to guide the conversation, but the main focus of interviews is to hear the stories of participants, so this interview will only be loosely structured around questions and answers.

#### 2. Rights Notice

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

- a. **Privacy** - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.
- b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless you choose otherwise.
- c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to you.

I understand that I will receive **no gift** or direct benefit for participating in the study.

I confirm that the learner has given me the address of the nearest School for International Training Study Abroad Office should I wish to go there for information. (404 Cowey Park, Cowey Rd, Durban).

I know that if I have any questions or complaints about this study that I can contact anonymously, if I wish, the Director/s of the SIT South Africa Community Health Program (Zed McGladdery 0846834982 )

Participant's name printed

Your signature and date

---



---

Interviewer's name printed

Interviewer's signature and date

---



---

I can read English. If the participant cannot read, the onus is on the project author to ensure that the quality of consent is nonetheless without reproach.

### Appendix 3: Loosely-Structured Interview Guide

#### I. Introductions:

##### a. Greetings

##### b. Informed consent form

- i. Be sure to verbalize: *If at any point you would like to end the interview early or if you would like for me to not include any portion of your interview in my project, please feel free to let me know. You are not required to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable doing so, and if after the interview is over you change your mind about me using your answers in my final project please contact me via my email or telephone—ensure they have this contact info, if not, write it down.*
- ii. Recorded interview → this information will be kept completely confidential → explain confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of their info

##### c. Demographics form

- i. This form provides some information about the participant but through follow-up questions throughout the interview get more info regarding their background.

##### d. Purpose:

- i. The purpose of this interview is to explore your various beliefs and ideas and discuss how you developed those beliefs. We will also discuss the process of changing your beliefs and how this change may or may not happen. This interview There will be a poetry component of this interview that we will do to begin the conversation. I will explain more about this exercise in a moment.

#### II. Poetry exercise

- a. Introduce this and what the point of it is. (*10 minutes*). Brief conclusion/wrap-up on this exercise

#### III. Interview: *start by sharing a bit of my story of beliefs. Don't overshare!*

- a. "How did you develop your values and belief systems?"
  - i. *follow-up with questions specific to what they explain*



**Appendix 4: Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)****SIT Study Abroad**

School for International Training

**Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP**

Student Name: Robin Mwai

Email Address: rmwai@wisc.edu

Title of ISP/FSP: What Lies in the Gray: creative analytic pieces

Program and Term/Year: Community Health and Social, Spring 2018

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