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Sydney Atkins  
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FOUND IN THE WORLD: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF HOW PLACE  
INFLUENCES THE GROWING FORMATION OF ONE'S IDENTITY

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School for International Training

Community Health and Social Policy: Spring 2020

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## **Abstract**

This paper incorporates both background information on place, human identity, and the African term *Ubuntu*, as well as personal stories from interviewees, to attempt to understand how both the physical location as well as human relationships aid in the growing formation of one's identity. The stories synthesized in this paper come from individuals living in Cato Manor, as well as my own personal experiences living in Colorado, Louisiana, and South Africa. I conducted six interviews with participants ranging in age and gender. I asked them to share their stories with me when answering questions about their personal relationship to Cato Manor, their relationships with other people living in Cato Manor, and who they felt they are as a person. I then used their stories as well as my own story to begin to understand how "place," both in the physical sense as well as the feeling of belonging to a group, plays a role in the growing formation of identity. Through this autoethnographic lens, I have learned about the complexities of identity formation for both the individuals I interviewed in Cato Manor and for myself, and I have outlined these findings through a narrative approach. As a result, I now better understand how the different places I have lived, as well as the relationships I have formed, have shaped and continue to shape my identity, and I have a better understanding how place and *Ubuntu* aid in the growing formation of the identities of the six individuals I interviewed.

**Key words:** place, identity, Ubuntu, autoethnography

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*“If you turn a story told into a story analyzed...you sacrifice the story at the altar of traditional sociological rigor. You transform the story into another language, the language of generalization and analysis, and thus you lose the very qualities that make a story a story” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 440).*

*This is a story told (Atkins, Personal Journal, 2020 April 24).*

## Preface

*“Life is big. It is funny, when you are a child the world does not feel big, even though you yourself are quite small. All you know is your Home, maybe your school, perhaps the neighborhood you live in, completely unaware that the world is bigger than the crust on your grilled cheese sandwich or the squishy top of your banana. You are small. You are kept unaware. The world is big.*

*Life is big. And as you grow up, you come to realize that the world is really big. Like really, really big. Now the crust on your grilled cheese sandwich and the squishy top of your banana is the least of your worries. Being unaware is no longer acceptable. You go through primary education with the expectation that you will move on to higher education, you have the expectation to hold a job, the expectation to act like an adult, the expectation to grow up. You are grown. You are big. But somehow the world does not feel smaller, in fact, the world feels infinitely bigger.*

*Have you ever felt lost?*

*Unsure of your purpose?*

*Frustrated from feeling like you are an absent character in your own life?*

*A misfit.*

*Lost.”*

(Atkins, Personal Journal, 23 April 2020)

To what extent does one’s growing formation of identity have ties to a sense of place in a community? How important is belonging somewhere to one’s wellbeing? How has the various places I have lived impacted who I feel I am today? To begin answering these questions, I would like to start this story with my own incomplete and ever-changing narrative of my own identity. Incomplete only because I refuse to believe that, through my 20 years of being alive, I have become an expert in knowing myself. Ever-changing only because I would like to think that I still possess the ability to grow as a person and learn about new aspects of myself that I have yet to come to understand. When I think of my own identity narrative, I find that there are not one or

two major life events that spark growth in the understanding of myself, but rather the most growth and change comes gradually with each new place I live, for a new place brings new challenges and, more importantly, new human connections that push me to look critically at who I feel I am as a person. After all, “Not only do we constitute and reconstitute our own social worlds, but we are also ourselves made and remade by them in the process” (Shotter, 1993, p. 4).

Coming to fully know your own identity is by no means an easy task, but perhaps knowing is not as important as understanding. Understanding that time does not stop for anyone. Understanding that change is vital to the continuance of life. Understanding that when faced with conflict you can either sink or swim. Understanding that growth is a choice. But, most importantly, understanding that the human condition is and will always be fluid.

This is a story about belonging. This is a story about Home.

## **Introduction**

### **Niwot, Colorado**

Following the works of the late psychologist Erik Erikson, I believe the narrative of my identity starts at the beginning of my life, for my young brain (as well as every other young brain) can be compared to a sponge, soaking in my surroundings, filling itself to the brim with information, and coming to understand the world around me through touch and tastes and sights and smells and sounds. Erikson's psychosocial theory of development examines "the complex interactions among the biological, psychological, and social factors that shape an individual's life" (Erikson & Erikson, 1981, p. 249). Erikson states that, "Identity really means defining yourself beyond being only your parents' child," and that, "Identity is necessary to confirm your past as well as your future and then to overcome the sole identification with your origins" (Erikson & Erikson, 1981, p. 254).

I am, at the core of my being, a child to those who have come before me. I am a daughter, a sister, a cousin, a niece, and a granddaughter. But those are labels given to me based on the family I was born into. I did not assign those titles to myself. Yes, all of those things are true, and yes, all of those things do, in some way, define my identity, but the growing formation of my identity is ongoing, and it only begins at my birth. That is why I feel it is important to start at the beginning, for you cannot understand growth without looking at where you started.

*Home. What does the word Home mean to me? What do I consider my Home? Well, that's a tricky one. At first, at the most basic level, Home to me means the place I grew up in. Home is Niwot, Colorado. Home is that white wood and red brick house with that steep driveway and those apple and cherry trees that I used to climb as a kid that produce the most delicious smelling blossoms in the spring and the bunny hole under the front porch and the tall living room with those dark brown leather couches and that deck that wraps from the back yard all the way around to the front. But what about all of the other places I have lived?*

It was a rather hot and sticky day in Cato Manor<sup>1</sup>. Melissa and I just got out of the Bolt<sup>2</sup> heading Home from school and we began our short walk Home to our Mamas<sup>3</sup>. We moved into our homestays just four short days ago, but for me it felt like I had been here a lifetime. We lived at the top of the hill, but Melissa and I did not mind as we enjoyed the steep walk characterized by the 15 or 20 children who would always stop what they were doing and greet us with a “Sawubona<sup>4</sup>” and a hug before allowing us to continue our trek Home. *These children have a childhood completely foreign to my own*, I remember thinking as I watched them run in and out and between the houses, greeting every woman with “Sawubona Mama” regardless of if the women were their Mama’s or not. These children were growing up in a special community, a community in which everyone felt like family, where it felt safe for people to be themselves, where everyone would laugh together, cry together, and live together. Where everyone seemed to belong.

Now, when I say South Africa is unlike any place I have ever visited, I truly mean it. I learned about the rich and fairly recent history of South Africa, I saw animals that I had only ever seen in animated movies, and I experienced and lived in a community where people actually talk to each other and share their lives with one another. It was in Cato Manor that I not only learned about, but also began to understand, the complex meaning of *Ubuntu*. A term deep-seated in African history, broken into two parts, “an analysis of the term shows it to consist of ‘two words in one’: a prefix *ubu-* and the stem *ntu-*, evoking a dialectical relationship of being and becoming” (Gichure, 2013, p. 119). *Ubuntu: Humanness or humanity* (isiZulu.net, 2020), the “concept of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed interdependently through community” (Battle, 2009, p. 2-3).

*Living in Colorado is fresh. The air is fresh, the water is fresh, the sunshine is fresh, the snow is fresh, it is all fresh. Living in Niwot has a hint of a small-town community, but it still feels very big. Growing up I did not really talk to my neighbors that much and many of my friends lived outside of my town. It was, and still is, a quiet place. On the occasions in which I*

<sup>1</sup> Cato Manor is a township located in Durban, South Africa where I lived for five weeks during my homestay experience.

<sup>2</sup> “Bolt” is a South African rideshare service

<sup>3</sup> “Mama” means “mother” in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> “Sawubona” is used as a greeting and means “we see you” in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> “Ubuntu” means “humanness” or “humanity” in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

*did speak to those around me, it was probably out on an evening walk or in the aisles of the local market when I needed to grab an ingredient for dinner that my mom forgot during her weekly trip to the grocery store. The topic being the usual small talk, questions about college, my plans for the future, how my younger brothers were enjoying high school. I was content in Niwot.*

Laughter. It lined the streets of Cato Manor. Every time I would greet people either on the way to school or my way Home, I would be greeted back with an ear-to-ear smile. Happiness. Different from simply being content. I started to question if these people were born naturally happy, or if the tight-knit, family-like community had something to do with it. Barbieri & Zani looked at the correlation between individuals' identity and well-being tied to having a sense of community (SOC) and found that there is "a strong positive relationship between SOC, identity, and well-being, and particularly emphasized SOC's role [in that relationship]" (Kenyon & Carter 2010 in Barbieri & Zani, 2015, p. 42). I wondered if this feeling of happiness was a result of *Ubuntu*. After all, "*Ubuntu* is a philosophy that promotes the common good of society and includes humanness as an essential element of human growth" (Venter, 2004, p. 149). But what about identity? To me, the people of Cato Manor seem confident in who they are, and I wondered if *Ubuntu* played a role in this. Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho contextualised *Ubuntu* by looking at the relationship between the individual and the collective whole. They found that "*Ubuntu* discourses juxtapose collectivism and individualism, but not as incompatible opposites. Rather the purpose in *Ubuntu* discourses is to emphasize the relatedness of the individual and the group and how each finds meaning and fulfillment through the other" (2013, p. 234).

*Growing up, I did not talk much, I was more of the introspective type, and I discovered that if I needed a place to think I could drive 20 minutes west and find myself lost in my thoughts all while surrounded by a pine tree-filled wonderland that is the Rocky Mountains. Living here has opened my eyes to the raw beauty of mother nature. I have learned to be content with silence, recognize the little joys life brings us, reflect on my thoughts instead of verbalizing them into existence, and, most importantly, keep to myself. I grew up content, not necessarily happy, but regardless, this is and will always be Home even if I no longer live there.*

## Methods

### New Orleans, Louisiana

*But what do I call the places in which I currently live? I have always been careful calling a place my “Home,” as if it is some sacred word. I have gone to school in New Orleans, Louisiana for the past three years. I have spent more time there than in Colorado since graduating high school. So why do I not call New Orleans, Home? Is it about acceptance? Acceptance that a place will be worthy enough to be referred to as my Home? Or perhaps Home is the place I feel most comfortable? A place where I am not a stranger to those around me? And how are some people so quick to change what they call Home?*

My dream is to be doctor, whether that be some type of surgeon or an OB/GYN I do not know yet, but the dream of wearing that white coat and stethoscope gives me butterflies in my stomach and brings a smile to my face. Entering my study abroad experience, I thought I was going to do a medical internship. After all, this is the type of experience I have been craving for most of my young life. I would be able to experience such a rush standing in the middle of all the chaos of the best trauma center in all of South Africa! Or, how amazing would it be to stand in the same room as a mother giving birth? I was stoked to say the least. But after living in Cato Manor for a few weeks, and after taking Clive’s advice and experimenting with keeping a journal, I found the STEM<sup>6</sup> part of my brain taking a step back and the more creative part of my brain taking over. I wanted to learn more about *Ubuntu* and what it means to truly be human. I wanted to listen to people tell their stories of who they think they are and how they came to be. I wanted to fully immerse myself in the life I was living, for this experience is like nothing I have ever experienced. I decided to put the eager pre-medical student aside and focus on the shy but inquiring part of myself. I decided to do an ISP.

*My first year in college was rough. I made the very adult decision of going to school over 1,000 miles away from my family. I grew up in a small town of about 4,000 people and I went to school with the same people from kindergarten to senior year of high school. I guess you could say that I was not very comfortable stepping outside my hometown “bubble” because, while I*

<sup>6</sup> STEM stands for “Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math” and is used to refer to the area of study I tend to focus on in my college courses.

*was sitting in my newly decorated dorm room right after a tearful goodbye with my parents, I felt like I had made one of the biggest mistakes I was ever going to make. I am a very quiet and shy person. I hate to take up space in a room and, at that time in my life, I was not very good at making friends. I mean, the last time I made a friend on my own was kindergarten, and I can thank the small and quiet town of Niwot, Colorado for that. Other than my few roommates, I did not speak to anyone.*

As my time in Cato Manor pushed forward, I found myself talking less but listening more. Listening to the stories Mama would tell me when I got Home from school, listening to the stories the children would tell me as I climbed that hill, listening to everything. I reflected on these stories in my journal every night before going to bed. I learned about the history of Cato Manor and I learned about all of the past homestays that came before me, I learned that there is something special about Cato, that the people are proud to call this place their Home. That was it, that was what I wanted to write about.

There is a difference between the people here and the people I grew up around back Home, and I wanted to explore that difference. According to Walker, “A place can be defined as a social entity or ‘membership group’ providing identity. A place is often associated with a certain group of people, a certain lifestyle and social status” (Walker, 2007, p. 3). I wanted to see if this place, whether that be a sense of belonging to the community like Walker stated, or that be the physical location of Cato Manor, aids in the formation of identity of the people that live here. Afterall, I found this to be true for myself. I discussed this idea with Clive and grew more and more excited as my ISP was starting to take shape.

*I felt very lost my first semester of college. I found that people would not speak to me unless I spoke to them first and, due to my introverted self, I decided that I would rather keep to myself than try to be outgoing. I partied a lot on the weekends because I found that it was much easier to talk to people after having a drink or two. School work was much harder than I thought it would be, so my weekend partying quickly turned into late night study sessions at the library in a desperate attempt to not fail calculus and chemistry. I cried a lot because I missed the life I had back in Colorado: my friend group, my near-perfect grades, and above all else, a place in which I felt like I belonged. One day, sometime before Thanksgiving break, I vividly remember*

*pulling up the University of Colorado, Boulder transfer application on my laptop. CU Boulder is a school that is about 20 minutes away from my house and it happens to be where 60% of my high school graduating class attends college. I knew that I would have friends if I transferred. I told myself that I would at least finish this semester and if things did not get better for me during my second semester in New Orleans, I would move back Home.*

*As a last-ditch effort to make friends, I decided to join a sorority. And I am so glad I did, if not for my other friends that I did end up making, for Sarah Lebold. I met Sarah during one of the first events for our sorority. I remember listening to her tell a funny story and I immediately knew I wanted to be friends with her. She is a year ahead of me in school but that did not stop me from reaching out to her, something my introverted self never imagined doing. A few months went by and, sure enough, not only is she one of my most important mentors, but she is my best friend.*

Everything happened so fast. One minute I was brainstorming my topic with Clive in his office and the next minute I found myself finishing my proposal and getting ready to submit it to the Local Review Board. I felt like my topic was inspired by my personal experiences in my quest to understand my own growing identity, and I was excited to listen to other's talk about their identity. But with the excitement came the fear. I was worried. I felt like I could not accurately write about the topic of identity formation related to a sense of place without also establishing my own personal reasons for choosing this topic. I wanted this project to not only reflect on what I was about to learn, but I also wanted it to be an all-encompassing report of how, through the act of telling their own stories, the people of Cato Manor helped me understand my own story. But I had never written a paper that allowed any room for the discussion of my own personal experiences. All I can say is thank goodness for Clive.

Somewhere within all of this madness, Clive introduced me to the creative writing style that is autoethnography. I had never heard of this type of academic writing before, but after doing some research I quickly came to understand that this is how I would tell my story. As Leon Anderson states,

“Autoethnography is somewhat unique in research in that it is particularly likely to be warranted by the quest for self-understanding... The kind of self-understanding I am talking about lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes

from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by – and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live” (2006, p. 390).

A world in which I can be both the researcher and a participant? It sounded too good to be true. I planned to interview six individuals hoping that the list of open-ended questions I brainstormed (**Appendix 2**) would be enough to evoke conversations as well as narratives and stories. But what was I supposed to do with those stories once I received them? As Ellis says,

“There are a number of ways to go about writing autoethnography...it really depends on where along the continuum of art and science you want to locate yourself...if you viewed your project as closer to art than science, then your goal would not be so much to portray the facts of what happened to you accurately but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience” (1999, p. 673-674).

Again, putting the traditional STEM part of my brain the background, I knew that if I wanted to ethically portray my participants’ stories, I would need to portray the meaning behind them instead of analyzing the facts within them.

## **Ethics**

*Sarah understands me better than anyone I have ever met, and everything feels safe when I am around her. If it were not for her kindness and friendship, I probably would have transferred to a school back in Colorado. I feel like I can be my truest self around her, and she makes me feel like I have a place in this big world. In a university with a social life much more elaborate than what I am used to, Sarah has taught me that it is okay to be quiet. It is okay to not want to go out every weekend, it is okay to keep to myself, but most importantly, it is okay to be unapologetically Sydney.*

Ethics. The aspect of my research I have thought about the most. I graduated high school as an International Baccalaureate (IB) recipient which is basically a fancy way of saying I not only learned the basic high school curricula, but I also learned valuable skills when it comes to planning and conducting my own experiments both in a lab and in a social science setting. One of the first rules my high school psychology teacher taught me was the importance of conducting ethical studies. Whether that meant maintaining confidentiality in a psychological study or not

forging data in a chemistry lab, ethical guidelines have been at the forefront of my academic career and, for the most part, have been relatively easy to follow. The data that I am used to working with is precisely that: *data*, also known as raw numbers, answers to a survey, number of people who agree with X statement, time it took for Y reaction to go to completion, number of successful trials, etc. The list goes on and on when it comes to the types of data I have worked with. As Rose (1993) says, “We are groomed to engage in certain types of research experiences and to compose texts that satisfy the expectations of our discipline’s norms. If our professional socialization takes, we learn to write effectively in the largely standardized genres that are accepted as legitimate in our discipline” (Rose 1993 in Bochner, 2012, p. 160). But that’s just it, this is a discipline I am not familiar with, and the data I am currently trying to collect is different than the “normal” type of data I am used to.

“The interpretation of self-identity as a biographical narrative suggests that ‘we can discover something of importance about the nature of selves in the tasks and commitments, projects and relationships that constitute the daily ecology of individuals’” (Little, 1993, p.159 in Williams & McIntyre, 2001, p. 398). This is part of the reason for choosing a narrative-based autoethnographic approach. I wanted my participants to feel like they could tell their whole story of who they are and, to me, it does not make a lot of sense to try to tell a your own narrative if you cannot tell the entire story from start to finish. Afterall, your identity is not shaped by one single life event, it is rather a collection of life events that define who you are.

I knew that I would want to record the interviews so I could give my undivided attention to the human being that sat before me. I wanted my participants to feel safe, I wanted them to feel like they could be their truest self, I wanted them to know that I am here to listen to their stories, that I am here to make them feel heard. I know how important it is to feel safe around another person when telling a story of who you are, and I have my best friend Sarah to thank for that, so I assured my participants that I would change their names and delete the recordings right after I was done transcribing them. I made sure they knew it was perfectly okay to skip a question if they did not feel comfortable answering it and that they could withdraw their consent at any time throughout the process. I wanted them to feel safe, I wanted them to feel comfortable. I knew that these individuals were about to trust me with their stories and, even if I used fake names, I knew I had a duty to tell their stories as honestly and accurately as possible.

I was also worried about my own positionality within all of this. Privilege. Something I knew I had, something that I had to be aware of when interviewing my participants. I am a white student from America, that is a fact I cannot change, but I can recognize the limitations of being a white student from America. I understood that, as the researcher, I evoke power, but it is my hope that because I am able to recognize this, I can do everything I can to limit this power dynamic.

*I was so lost my freshman year, pretending to be someone I was not in hopes that I would make friends. I finished high school as the “overachiever,” with close to perfect grades, participation in varsity and club sports, a friend group in which I felt like I belonged, and a bright future ahead of me with an acceptance to one of my top-choice universities. How did things change so fast? I was struggling to achieve even an average grade in most of my classes, I was not making friends, I felt like New Orleans was a big and unforgiving city, and honestly, I was spiraling out of control. I know it sounds dramatic, but I would not be the person I am today if it were not for Sarah.*

The last concern I had regarding the ethics of my research was how I planned on selecting which stories to portray. I struggled because, although I knew portraying the entire interview for each of my six participants would be the most authentic way to tell their stories, I understood that doing so would not be very practical. As quoted in Hendry 2007,

“Bourdieu argues, ‘human life itself is incoherent, consisting of elements standing alongside each other or following each other, without necessarily being related. It consists of confusion, contradictions, and ironies, and of indecisiveness, repetition, and revision’” (p. 142) and that, “As researchers we construct lives by reducing them to a series of events, categories, or themes and then put them back together again to make up a whole called *narrative*. Thus, by constructing narratives we not only ultimately erase part of our lived experience but also impose a particular way of thinking about experience” (Hendry, 2007, p. 491).

In an attempt for clarity, I planned on first transcribing my recordings including every pause, exclamation, “like,” “um,” and “uh.” Then, without changing the actual expressions my participants used, I would go back and “clean up” the dialogue by fixing any grammar mistakes

and taking out “filler words” in order to allow for a better flow. Finally, I would comb through my transcripts, picking out the stories that felt the most important to my participants, knowing that these stories may not be coherently related to one another as life itself is incoherent. I would do this by selecting stories that participants sounded excited to tell, stories my participants told with confidence, and stories that my participants mentioned or alluded to in multiple answers. By doing this, I know I sacrifice some authenticity, but I do so at the price of making sure the stories I portray can be understood with ease. In my opinion, it feels most ethical to make sure my readers can fully understand my participants’ stories at the loss of some amount of authenticity than tell the unedited stories with the fear of my readers not understanding my participants. However, I will try to maintain each of my participants’ voices or idiosyncrasies by leaving the actual language my participants responded in.

I turned my proposal in to the Local Review Board and exhaled a sigh of relief. It was finally happening; everything was falling perfectly together. I say *was* because little did I know, in four days’ time, I would wake up to find myself not in Durban, South Africa, but back in Niwot, Colorado.

*Living in New Orleans is magical, and I never realized just how magical of a place until I had to leave it. This city is painted with the most vibrant palette of colors I think I have ever seen. The twang of the southern Creole accents and the smooth brassy notes from the trumpets weave through the city in the same way that the Mississippi River does. Living here has taught me to move slow and take in information from all of my senses. The feeling of the hot sticky summer air, the smell of a fresh crawfish boil, the sounds of the streetcar running down St. Charles, the taste of raw oysters and strawberry daiquiris, the yellow and pink and blue shotgun-style houses lining both sides of the street, and the sound of people laughing while dancing to the music from a second-line. Living in New Orleans has taught me to have fun, that life does not always have to be so serious. That it is okay to dance in the street and stay out past midnight and paint your house fun colors and be unapologetically yourself. Living here feels like a Home for misfits, a place where people’s true self is celebrated instead of criticized. Living here, for me, has been a realization that there is no reason too small to have a party and celebrate the fact that we are alive.*

## Findings

### Cato Manor, South Africa

*Admittedly, I did a lot of growing between the end of my freshman year and the middle of my junior year, even if, at times, I was unaware of it. Sometimes, I would find myself in the same headspace I had during my freshman year, but Sarah was always there to remind me how much I had grown since then. It took a lot to get me to go abroad. I mean, one of the writing prompts Clive had us write to at the beginning of the program was, “What brings you to this program?” and I literally wrote, “Honestly, I do not know why I am here” (Atkins, Personal Journal, 3 February 2020).*

COVID-19. Who would have thought that a virus, something that is only half-living, would force me to leave Cato Manor and send me back Home to America two months ahead of schedule? I was devastated. I truly thought that my own fear of going abroad would send me back to the States before anything else would. But the show must go on. How was I supposed to conduct my interviews from halfway around the world? It felt wrong to interview people about their identity and whether or not they felt like they belong in their community OVER THE PHONE. I mean, my research topic is literally based in human connection, and I would be talking about human connection and identity without actually being there in person. But nevertheless, she persisted.

*As I was on my plane en route to South Africa, I made a list of all of my abroad fears which, looking back, it would have been much easier and a much shorter list to make a list of what I was **not** afraid of. I wish I was kidding when I say I was afraid of everything.*

*“When will I shower? I forgot to bring my shower shoes. Will I have to shower without shower shoes? What about laundry? When will I be able to do it? Will I write an ISP? Or will I have an internship? How can I possibly learn isiZulu in two months when I could not learn French after five years? I have never had a homestay, what if my Mama does not like me? What if I am too unstable? What if it is like freshman year all over again? Will I be able to keep in touch with my friends at Home? I already miss Sarah...”*

(Atkins, Personal Journal, 19 January 2020)

It was a Thursday morning; I woke up at least two hours before my first scheduled interview just to make sure my wifi was working, my computer and phone were fully charged, and I had my list of questions and my consent form (**Appendix 1**) pulled up on my laptop screen. I was nervous. *What if I read the consent form too fast? What if they do not understand me or my questions? I hate talking to people over the phone, it makes me anxious, I would much rather talk to people in person* (Atkins, Personal Journal, 8 April 2020). Finally, it was time for my first interview. I sat down at my desk and, as the phone rung, I hit record on my voice recorder. My heart was beating out of my chest and my hands would not stop sweating. Bandile's voice picked up the other end of the line. Greetings were exchanged as we discussed the current COVID-19 situation (both of our countries were under a strict shelter-in-place policy) and I could feel myself relax. I exhaled a deep breath, completely unaware that I was holding it in. I read him my consent form and started asking him questions.

Interview after interview went by, and my confidence and excitement grew with each. I knew I missed Cato Manor, but talking to these people I realized just how much I wished to be back Home at the top of the hill with Mama. I left so suddenly that I did not get the chance to give the country, but more importantly the people I had grown close to, a proper goodbye. My heart hurt. But I knew that, in order for me to fully honor the people that accepted me for who I was when I first stepped foot in their Home, I would make sure to handle their stories with care. As Hendry states, "Narrative research has been characterized as providing a method for 'telling stories,' giving voice to those traditionally marginalized, and providing a less exploitative research method than other modes" (2007, p. 481). The last thing I wanted to do was use my participant's stories as a way to exploit them, simmering them down to nothing but analyzed data.

*On and on my list of abroad fears went. But above all, I was most worried about making friends. Despite these fears, I knew going abroad was something I needed to do because, "I was comfortable where I was. I guess I was not pushing myself. I guess I needed to be pushed by other people in a completely foreign and uncomfortable environment"* (Atkins, Personal Journal in a second response to Clive's previous question "What brings you to this program?" 3 February 2020). *I did not want my semester abroad to be overtaken by my fear of not making friends. I did*

*not like the idea of leaving my life in New Orleans because it took me so long to feel comfortable living in it. But this was something I needed to do for myself.*

*Easy enough, Sydney. Just tell their stories! Answer your research question!* I thought to myself after I finished transcribing my six interviews. Except easy, it was not, and answering my researching question suddenly felt incredibly overwhelming and messy. It has taken me at least three years to even begin accurately telling my own story (a story I should be highly familiar with) and answering my research question in regards to myself, so how was I supposed to go about telling the stories of other people and drawing conclusions from what they told me? After reading through my transcripts for probably the fifth time, something finally clicked inside my head. I realized I couldn't tell just *their* stories, for *their* stories make meaning for only themselves. But what I could do was tell the story of *us*, a story that forms at the intersection of them and me.

The following six sections correspond to the six individuals that were kind enough to trust me with their experiences, their inner thoughts, their stories. As you read, I hope you yourself can make some sort of meaning arise out of these pages, and perhaps you will find yourself in the same amount of self-reflection that I too found myself in. But these stories are not meant to portray any definite conclusions, for trying to find an all-encompassing answer to some of life's biggest questions in regard to the fluidity and complexity of human identity may very well be truly impossible.

*"Life: a constellation of vital phenomena—organization, irritability, movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation" (Mara, A Constellation of Vital Phenomena 2013, p. 184)*

**Life is messy, but we should celebrate the beauty in the mess instead of worrying about cleaning it up.**

## **Learning from Mistakes**

### **Bandile's Story** (Bandile, interview 2020)

"Do you think you have changed as a person during the time that you have lived in Cato Manor?" I asked calmly.

“I would say that I have grown; I have learned. But I have not changed the physical location during my time in Cato. I still live here, I still take a taxi to town, that is all the same. But yes, some things have changed, I have learned so much.” Bandile replied.

I agreed with Bandile, as I too spent most of my life living in the same place. I grew up in Colorado, physically and mentally. But no matter how much I learned or how much I grew, my bedroom stayed the same, I took the same roads to get to the city, and Home never changed even though I did.

“Can you share any stories about the ways you have changed while living here in Cato Manor?”

*Bandile took a deep breath and a long pause before replying.*

“Um, sure. As a kid growing up, I used to stay up late. This would happen almost every night, you know, my friends and I, we would mess around and go out, some nights we would stay out until we saw the sunrise. Well, one night we were out late and some of my friends got in an accident, they were killed.”

*Another deep breath and another long pause before Bandile continued.*

“You know, I learned from this. This place, Cato, has some bad people, but now I am able to understand that. I know that there are some influences here that I stay away from because I actually have to think about the future, I have to dream big. I realized this and that is why I worked hard, that is why I was able to go to university. I’ll be graduating this year, and I would not be if I did not learn from the lessons that Cato taught me. I have learned so much both about myself and the people that live here.”

I paused, slightly out shock that he felt comfortable enough with me to share this vulnerable part to himself, but mostly because I wanted to reflect on the story he just told. A story of pain and loss. A story that he felt defined a moment in his childhood. A story that signified his own paradigm shift. His story made me think of what Merrill et al. said about painful past events and self-growth, that “the ability to conceptualize stressful events in light of positive characteristics, outlooks, or growth of the self may reduce the amount of distress derived from the event, and thus may be related to higher levels of identity exploration and commitment,” and that perhaps, “the ability to create positive meaning, especially from negative experiences, allows for both psychological and identity growth” (Merrill et al., 2015, p. 1325).

Growing up, whenever I made a mistake, all of the important adults in my life would say the same thing: *It is okay to make mistakes, but it is not okay to make them more than once. You have to learn from them.* This phrase has stuck with me throughout my entire life, it is something I live by. I hate making mistakes as much as the next person, but making mistakes comes with the territory of self-growth, and I suppose if I can learn something from those mistakes, they must be important mistakes to make.

“How do you get along with other residents in Cato Manor?” I asked.

“I have so many friends here that I have known since I was a kid. The people here are like brothers to me. These families watched me grow up, and I feel like being here with them is a part of my identity. The people here help me make the right decisions, they look out for me and they tell me when I am wrong, I feel like they have been doing that all my life, since I was a kid. They will tell me when I do something wrong, and I appreciate the people that have stuck around me. They guide me to do what is right. I am not perfect, but I do not think anyone is.”

I felt like I understood what Bandile was saying, that he would not be the person he is today without past events that changed the way he thought about life and without the people that guided him and helped him grow to be a polite and respectful young man. He could have fallen into the same situation that his friends did that night of the accident, but instead he grew and came to the understanding that he has a purpose in his life.

“I still have a dream and I still believe in myself and I know that it will all work out someday. I think my purpose is to someday be able to provide for my society and my family, provide for the people that knew me as a kid.” Bandile continued.

I admire Bandile’s strength to take past events and past sorrows and use them as motivation, motivation to be the best version of himself, motivation to continue growing, but most importantly motivation to give back to those who helped shape his identity. I finished the interview, thanked him for his time and leaned back into my chair, allowing myself to reflect on the story I just heard.

*Two very important traits about me are that I 1) strongly dislike change and 2) I do not do well in small groups, especially small groups that I have to live with and eat with and breathe with for extended periods of time. So, this study abroad program was not my original cup of tea. Nevertheless, I knew I had to make an effort if I did not want to be miserable for the next three*

*months. I came prepared to be the odd one out in the group. I know my shy self, and I know that I come off as mean and scary, so I figured making friends was not going to be a very easy time for me. Luckily, I was wrong.*

## **Understanding Differences**

### **Nobuhle's Story** (Nobuhle, interview 2020)

“In what ways are the relationships you have in Cato important to you?”

*There was a slight pause on the other end of the line before hearing Nobuhle's confident voice fill the phone.*

“My relationships are very important to me. They are important because we get to know each other's differences. We all come from different households; we are all different. Some of us are advantaged and some of us are disadvantaged, even though we all live in the same neighborhood; we are all different. It really helps because you get to learn about other people's perspectives and other people's beliefs. You get to learn more about others instead of just knowing yourself, or the people from your school, or your own family. You learn to see how some people are different. It is easy to judge other people without getting to know them first, but once you communicate with them, you begin to see some of the struggles they might be going through. They might be having problems at Home or problems in life that you cannot see on the outside, but once you get to know them, you can really see the background they are coming from. My relationships are important to me. They help me get to know others and get to know each other's sides and backgrounds, and that allows me to think twice before I judge another person. I think our differences makes us stronger in a way. You do not have that idea of ‘oh I am better than you’ without knowing first where that person came from.”

I cracked a smile on the other end of the line. What Nobuhle just said was humbling. She understood the importance of getting to know other people before judging them, something I have struggled with in the past. I went to a small high school in a small town. For the most part, everyone that went to my school grew up in the same area. I had been in classes with the same people since I was five years old, but I suddenly found myself paired with the new girl in my high school biology lab. Her name was Shanti. I had seen her around, but never made it my intention to get to know her. I mean, why would I? I knew other people; I had enough friends. As the school year moved forward, I learned a lot about Shanti: she never turned her homework in

on time, she always did things at the last minute, and she did not study for exams (made extremely clear by the way she would try to cheat off of me). In my mind, Shanti just did not care about anything, and I judged her for that. But one day, my entire perception of Shanti changed. I stayed after biology class one day because I needed to talk to my teacher, but I found she was busy talking to Shanti. I did not want to overhear their conversation, but I couldn't help it. That day I learned that Shanti just moved to my high school, that she did not have any friends, that she was struggling with her schoolwork because she did not want to go to a school where nobody talked to her. The next day I asked Shanti if she wanted to eat lunch with me. I learned a lot about her family and where she grew up and we are still friends to this day.

What Nobuhle said about understanding other people's backgrounds before judging them made a lot of sense to me. If I had not chosen to put aside my initial judgments of Shanti in order to get to know her, I would still think of her as lazy. I would not have made a friend.

"How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you?" I asked.

"That's a good one. I would say that I am a very open person, very straightforward. I do not judge, and I believe that you have to listen to what others have to say and learn about what others like before you can judge them. Growing up I went to a white school, and people I grew up with used to say, 'Oh Nobuhle is so full of herself. She thinks she is better than us because she goes to a white school,' but that was not true. I did not think I was better than anybody, my mother just thought it was important for me to go to a white school. I know what it feels like to be judged by people who do not know you, but after we all grew up, I now think they understand me better. We chill together, we share our thoughts, and we have conversations."

*Nobuhle paused.*

"I am a person who is always there to listen. I am a very soft person, like I get very emotional very easily. I am very open, and I like a person who is always straightforward with me, I do not like a person who lies. I just like people that are honest so that is what I try to be. Honest. I would say I am Nobuhle! I am a grown woman!"

*Nobuhle paused again, before continuing, this time sounding a little unsure of herself.*

"I do not know what to say. I am who I am. But sometimes I do not know who I am because sometimes things happen, and you start questioning who you really are. Am I not human? Am I not getting hurt? Am I just a rock? A monster? But when that happens, I just have to remind myself that I am a strong woman, I am not a failure, I do not give up easily."

I thought about this answer. I mean, I have my fair share of feeling lost and not knowing who I am, but I just thought that is because I do not possess a lot of self-confidence. But Nobuhle was so confident in her answers, she spoke so wisely about her own privilege growing up and how that privilege made her feel like an outcast. She talked about how others judged her at face value, how others did not get to know her before making up their opinions about her. She talked about how, because of this, she waits until she truly knows a person before judging them, and that this trait is now part of her identity, part of how she defines herself. Hearing Nobuhle confidently talk about herself for thirty minutes, I was very surprised to hear her say that she too feels lost sometimes. I now understand that even the most confident and wise people have doubts about who they are. The fluidity and complexity of human life.

I thanked Nobuhle for her time and we went our separate ways.

*Within the first two weeks of adjusting to life in South Africa, I felt like I had known these ten other individuals in my group for the majority of my life. From the nights in Marloth Park where Gracie and I sat outside looking at the stars, to the long car rides in Zed's van listening to him talk about sugarcane and complain about trucks carrying coal. From the evenings spent on Mama's porch, screaming every time a cockroach would fly towards us, to the intersection of Lisburn and Horley Close where Melissa, Gabe, and I would spend countless hours after school discussing topics such as the importance of relationships, the meaning of life, and the joys of finding your own "Sarah Lebold." From learning to understand just how much Katie loves cows and corn, to listening to Ellie belt out the lyrics to her favorite boyband during karaoke night at Charlie's. I was surprised that I could make friends in such a short period of time let alone feel like I had a place in this small group.*

## **Home is Where the Heart is**

### **Mama Thabo's Story** (Mama Thabo, interview 2020)

“How do you feel about living in Cato Manor? Would you rather be living somewhere else?”

*A split second of silence before Mama Thabo's loud voice filled the silence of my room.*

“Nuh uh uh! Never! I would never live somewhere else! Our area, it is really so good to be here. Other people think it is not, but if you are staying in Cato, you know that you do not want to be anywhere else. Cato is my Home, and it has been my Home ever since I moved here.”

Williams & McIntyre (2001, p. 400) stated that, “Modern ways of living give the old adage ‘home is where the heart is’ new meaning. While it has always suggested that the notion of home is inseparable from one’s sense of self, it also implies that home is not necessarily where one physically (or legally) resides.” Finding a Home outside of where you were born. I thought of New Orleans, the large oak trees that lined the streets, the overwhelmingly hot and humid summers, my second Home. New Orleans is not for everyone. Before leaving for my first year of college, my dad talked about signing me up for self-defense classes. “The city is dangerous! I mean, look at all of the crime reports that have happened in the last month,” he would say to me. I would just roll my eyes at him, but deep down I was a little afraid. Niwot is a small town, it is safe, and I had never lived in a place where my surrounds could potentially be unsafe. But New Orleans is my Home. I understood what Mama Thabo was saying, about how outsiders think negatively about Cato. I had felt the same way explaining to my parents over the phone that New Orleans is special, that you have to live here in order to understand it. And, after living in Cato, I understood Mama Thabo even better.

I remember working out one day at the gym across the street from the SIT office. One of the men working out introduced himself to me, asking me where I was from and what I was doing in South Africa. The conversation was going well, or so I thought, until I told him that I was living in Cato Manor as part of my homestay experience. His expression quickly turned from warm to cold. He proceeded to tell me how I must move out of my homestay and find a different place to live because Cato Manor is dangerous. Sadly, this type of conversation happened almost every other day with people I met at restaurants, bars, and taxis. I did not understand. As a small woman, I tend to feel unsafe in most places, making sure I do not walk anywhere alone, but in Cato I felt nothing but love, I felt safe. I asked Melissa’s Mama about it, about why people think negatively of Cato, and she said the same thing that Mama Thabo just told me: *They do not live here, they do not know, they do not understand.* Mama Thabo’s heart belongs to Cato Manor, much like the hearts of many other people that live there. Cato Manor is her Home.

“What are you most proud of Mama?”

“I can tell you that today, at my age, some of the people that I grew up with, they do not even know who they are. Some are dead, but I am still alive, and I know who I am. So yeah, I am proud to be me. I cannot change myself. I do not want to change myself. I like to collect things to donate to other people in need, I am proud of that. But above all, I am kind. I love people. You know, we all need one another so it is important to have and build a relationship with everybody. I open my house to anybody who is struggling outside, I want to help people. That is me.”

Mama Thabo’s interview was short, but she made herself very clear. She really does open her house to everybody, and I was lucky enough to have a place in her house while I was living in Cato. Cato Manor lives in Mama Thabo just as parts of Mama Thabo live in Cato Manor: *Ubuntu.*

*The amount of surprise from my ability to make friends also came with my host Mama. On that list of fears, the word “HOMESTAY” made its appearance in all uppercase letters in the center of the page. I was nervous about every aspect of my homestay, but I was most nervous about how I could possibly belong in this woman’s life. I mean, I felt like an intruder! Let me just say that the amount of love and support that sweet woman gave me could last me an entire lifetime. She taught me how to love with my entire soul. She taught me to do things that brought me joy, a concept embarrassingly foreign to me. She found perfections in my imperfections. I know I do not belong in Cato; I know I am still an intruder, but in Mama’s eyes, I am like her biological child. “What’s mine is yours, child” is a phrase she would say to me at least once a day and, because of her, I felt like I was right where I was supposed to be. Because of her I felt like I belonged.*

## **Sticking to Their Roots: Part 1**

### **Gabisile’s Story** (Gabisile, interview 2020)

“What does the word ‘Home’ mean to you?”

*Gabisile took a second to think before answering.*

“Well, Home basically means a place of comfort, a place of love, somewhere where your loved ones are, where you feel comfortable with the people you call your family.”

“Do you find those qualities in Cato? Do you think of Cato as your Home?”

“I am happy with Cato. It is my Home.”

Gabisile's voice was calm and soft, it brought comfort to me. We talked slowly, taking in each other's words and thinking over them a few times before speaking.

"Do you feel that living in Cato is a part of who you are?"

*A pause, I could hear children laughing in the background.*

"Not really. I do not think it is a part of who I am. The reason I say that is because with us Zulu people, we have tradition and cultures that we follow. I moved to Cato three or four years ago from the rural areas and I think that the traditions I learned there are part of who I am more than the fact that I live here now."

"Do you think you have changed as a person during the time you have lived in Cato?" I asked.

"No. I have not because I stick to my traditions and cultures. I feel like I have not changed at all. But I have made friends here in Cato."

"Do you value those friendships?" I responded.

"Yes. They are important to me because here in Cato, the houses are so close together, so you find that you need each other more. You find that, for example where my Gogo<sup>7</sup> lives, her neighbors do not like her. It is very hard for her. Nobody talks to her or visits her. She gets lonely. So yeah, I think I value my relationships because a person is a person with other people. That is what we call *Ubuntu*. And that is the case here in Cato."

Gabisile was the first one of my participants to define herself outside of Cato. While she still thinks of Cato as her Home, her identity takes root in her past Home, because that is where she learned about her traditions and her history. In Gabisile's case, aspects of her identity lie in culture. According to Wexler (2009), "Cultural identification includes recognizing one's cultural attributes—beliefs, values, practices, norms, traditions, and heritage—along with understanding how they are (and are not) reflected in one's self" (p. 269), and that "The ways in which people understand their collective, cultural history can have profound effects on an individual's sense of identity" (p. 270). While Cato may not be part of Gabisile's identity, she still links her identity to the feeling of belonging, in her case it was belonging as an African.

"What would you like to be better at?" I asked.

"There are certain things in my life that happened and one day I would like to forgive myself for those things. I do not have a mother anymore, she passed away in 2014, so if I could

<sup>7</sup> "Gogo" means "grandmother" in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

get the chance, I would like to find closure. I want to be able to have a last conversation with her, just so my heart can finally be at peace and I can forgive myself for some things that I did in my life that I am not quite proud of.”

“Okay last question Gabisile. How would you answer the question ‘Who are you?’”

“Well, I am an African child who is not ashamed of who she is. I am not ashamed of speaking up even if it makes other people feel uncomfortable. I like to make myself heard at times, but not too much, just so other people are not intimidated or offended. I am who I am. And I am proud to say that.”

I was quiet for a second, content in the fact that Gabisile was content in being herself. I felt proud, proud that I had gotten to know someone who was so dedicated to their roots, to the foundations they were taught as a kid. I was so focused on all of the thoughts running around in my head that I almost missed Gabisile’s question to me:

“Who is Sydney?”

I quickly pulled myself back into reality. At the start of all my interviews I encouraged my participants to ask me questions, to not be afraid of getting to know me as I was getting to know them. I guess I was just shocked because Gabisile was the first person to actually take me up on that offer.

“Uh, me?” I stuttered back nervously.

“Yeah! How would you describe yourself? Who is Sydney?” Gabisile replied.

I froze for a second before remembering the answers to these questions that I had prepared for Clive in the weeks prior.

“So, who am I? Well, I am always Sydney, always myself, but I guess being myself changes from day to day. I would say that I am a friend to most people. Sometimes I am really loud and happy, but sometimes I get quiet and sad.”

*I exhaled and took another deep breath before continuing.*

“I am a student in university, someday I want to be a doctor. I am a daughter to my mom and dad, a sibling to two younger brothers, a cousin, a niece, and a granddaughter. I tend to be soft and quiet most of the time but sometimes I can be outgoing. I have had some troubles in my life, whether that be understanding who I am or whether I think I am good enough or not, but I would say that I am persistent and resilient.”

*I thought of Sarah and her important role in my life.*

“I think I am who I am because of the people that surround and support me, I am who I am because of my friends. But most importantly, I would say that I am a constant work in progress. I am not perfect, and it has taken me a long time to be okay with being imperfect.”

I sat back, nervously waiting for Gabisile to respond. *Is this how my participants feel when I interview them?* I wondered, but before I had time to finish that thought Gabisile’s smooth and calm voice came over the phone.

“Mmmmm. That is wonderful,” she said, “Thank you for that answer.”

I thanked her for not only answering my questions but also for allowing me to tell her a little bit about myself. After all, human connection is a two-way street.

*Living in Cato is busy. Although I only lived in Cato for five weeks, I have never felt such a greater sense of community than I did on those hilly streets. Children would greet me with hugs and follow me Home from school. Mamas that I did not know would smile an ear-to-ear smile while greeting me with a “Sawubona” on my walk down to meet my friends at the local bar. Living here showed me that children have such a unique perspective on the world they are living in and they should be cherished for that. I learned that respect is like a currency and it can go a long way. The people of Cato greeted me with open arms and while their kindness assured me, I was not an intruder, I knew that I would always be the outsider. This community shares a special bond, I know because I felt it. It was not just your kid; it was everyone’s kid. It was not just your Home; it was everyone’s Home. Living here was difficult for me for many different reasons: I am quiet and reserved, I grew up in a community that was loosely stitched together, and I tend to keep to myself. I was not used to the tightly stitched, always active, family-like community I found myself in. But I knew, even if those five weeks were some of the most difficult weeks of my semester abroad, I always had a Home at my Mama’s house, and I know that if I ever go back, I will still have that Home.*

## **Sticking to Their Roots: Part 2**

**Themba’s Story** (Themba, interview 2020)

“What makes you happy about living in Cato?”

*A small laugh escaped Themba’s lips.*

“The feeling of belonging. Being around the people that you grew up with and seeing people that were born after you growing up in the same way that you grew. It is really cool, it makes you feel like you are a part of something bigger than yourself, you are part of a larger story. I feel that Cato is just part of who I am, like I cannot talk about myself without mentioning Cato because this is where I was born, this is where my roots are. There is that feeling of family. Cato is not a neighborhood where your neighbors live far from your house, we are all in one place, so you are bound to know your neighbor and the next neighbor and the next neighbor. It is a community, a place where you live, a place where you grow up, it is like a family. I mean, I have relationships with my peers that I went to school with, my peers that live close to my house, and my peers that I go to church with. There are so many different groups that one person can be connected to by living in a place like Cato.”

As Shotter says, “To live within a community which one senses as being one’s own, as ‘mine’ and well as ‘yours’, as ‘ours’ rather than ‘theirs’, a community for which one feels able to be answerable, one must be more than just a routine producer of it; one must in a real sense also play a part in its creative reproduction and sustenance as a ‘living’ tradition” (Shotter, 1993, p. 2). Not only did I feel like this is what Themba was getting at, I also found this to be true in my own life. I am the oldest of my parent’s children meaning I did not get to watch other people grow up before I had to. I stumbled and made mistakes because I did not have anyone that was older to help guide me. But I guess I did not mind being the first because it meant I got to watch my two younger brothers grow. I loved it when my brothers would come to me for advice, whether that be advice on how to study for a certain class or how to navigate the hallways of a high school. I was, and I suppose still am, a mentor to them. I taught them family traditions like how to make cherry pie with the sweet cherries that grew on our cherry tree during the summer, or how to properly eat white sticky rice when we were around my Japanese grandparents. I watched them grow up the same way I grew up and, like Themba said, it really did make me feel like I was part of something bigger than myself. It felt good.

I also understood how a place so big could feel like a family to Themba. Initially I had a rough time transitioning from high school to college, and it really came down to the fact that I felt like I did not belong. But after branching out and finding various groups of people I felt comfortable with, I quickly felt like I had found a family, and the once very large and unfamiliar campus quickly became my Home.

“What do you think your best qualities are?” I asked.

“Well, myself as a person I think that I am caring. I am outgoing, socially very intelligent, and I pride myself in being proud of myself. But I am a brother more than anything. I am not yet a father and I have been a son for most of my life. Now I have made brothers along my life, and I have little brothers that I am taking care of, so I would like to think of myself as a brother more than anything else.”

I could tell that Themba was a family man just by the way he sounded when speaking about his Home. I could imagine him wearing the biggest smile throughout my entire interview and, I am sure if I had interviewed him in person, I would have seen just how big that smile could be.

*If you have ever learned a foreign language, you know the struggle of finding certain words that do not have an English equivalent. For me, Ubuntu is that word. “I am because we are, we are because I am, an always active and everchanging equilibrium” (Atkins, Personal Journal, 22 January 2020), a term that I have unknowingly been longing for to attribute to the formation and growth of my identity. I give my thanks to Cato Manor for not only teaching me this word, but for opening up to me and showing me the true meaning of Ubuntu. I have learned that some aspects of Ubuntu have been with me in every stage of my life. At Home in Niwot I found Ubuntu in my brothers and my parents, at Home in New Orleans I found Ubuntu in Sarah Lebold, and at Home in Cato Manor I found Ubuntu in my Mamas, Babas<sup>8</sup>, Bhutis<sup>9</sup>, and Sisis<sup>10</sup>.*

## **Take Me Home Gardens Road**

### **Sifiso’s Story** (Sifiso, interview 2020)

Out of all my interviews, I was most nervous for Sifiso’s. Sifiso is a friend, and we got to know each other pretty well during my time in Cato. It felt strange interviewing someone I was so close to, I felt like we should be having a conversation with organic questions and organic answers instead of having an interview where I ask the pre-formed questions and all he does is try his best to answer. It was this interview that I feared the power I held as a researcher would

<sup>8</sup> “Baba” means “father” or “dad” in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> “Bhuti” means “brother” in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> “Sisi” means “sister” in isiZulu (isiZulu.net, 2020)

influence the answers Sifiso gave me. The first few questions I asked came with very short answers. I grew even more nervous, thinking this interview was starting down the wrong path. But, as we both grew more comfortable with each other, his answers gradually got longer and longer. It was like old times. It was like I was back in Cato.

“All right Sifiso, how would you answer the question ‘Who are you?’”

“Well, firstly my name is Sifiso. My name is Sifiso, and I see myself as a person who is always happy, always positive. I do not believe in the term negative; I do not believe in being angry. One time when I was a kid, I stood in front of my mirror when I was crying. I stared at myself, tears running down my face and everything. Then, I stood in front of my mirror when I was super angry, my fists clenched, I wanted to punch the reflection. Finally, I stood in front of the mirror when I was smiling and laughing, when I was happy. As I grew up, I realized that I could only choose one version of myself, the sad Sifiso, the angry Sifiso, or the happy Sifiso. I liked the happy one, so that is why whenever you see me, I am always smiling.”

I thought about what Sifiso just said and I thought about the type of person that I am when I am around others. When I am back Home in New Orleans, I do not necessarily think of myself as happy, most of the time I am just stressed out about an upcoming exam. Being stressed is inevitable when you are in college but putting all your energy toward showing that emotion is a choice. Sifiso chose happiness, and although it probably is not always the easiest choice to make, he chooses it because happy Sifiso is the best version of himself. Choose happiness. Choose to see the good in life. That is just one of the many lessons I learned from Sifiso.

“I am a person who does not regret anything in life because every experience and every encounter you go through is growth.” Sifiso said. “I believe that dreams exist, it is just a matter of how hard you are going to chase after them. One of my dreams is to be financially successful, but at the same time, I think I have already found success in the life I am currently living. I am someone who believes in love and family and trust, but I have learned not to put my trust into a lot of people. I do not trust people easily. I give out hope. Before I give out trust, I give out hope that I can give out my trust. It feels safer, you know? Like if you break my hope, it won't be as bad as if you were to break my trust.”

And that was lesson number two. I do not trust people easily because I know the pain when someone breaks your trust. I had a best friend in high school. I never hesitated to tell her anything and everything, from typical school drama to all my deepest darkest secrets. She was

the first person I truly trusted with my life, I felt like I could be myself around her, I could show her who the real Sydney was. Little did I know that she did not feel the same way about me. So, you can imagine my surprise when I logged onto my Instagram<sup>11</sup> and saw that she shared all of my secrets with everyone I knew, that she never considered me her friend, that she broke my trust. I was devastated, and I never thought I would trust another human being with the information that I trusted her with. A few years later, I met Sarah Lebold. I was slow in trusting Sarah, still scarred from the last person I trusted. But as Sifiso would say, I started by giving out hope. After realizing that Sarah was gentle with my hope, that she had no plans to hurt me, I slowly gave her my trust. I would be lying if I said it was not scary, it was flat out terrifying. But, no matter how many times I thought she would, Sarah never broke that trust. And I gradually became less terrified, dare I say that I even became comfortable. I love a lot of people, but I too have learned to be cautious with who I give my trust to.

“So how do you get along with the people of Cato Manor?” I asked.

“We are like one big group of friends with smaller sub-groups of friends, if that makes sense.”

*Sifiso paused, as if waiting for a response from me. When he did not get one, he continued explaining.*

“So, for example, the boys from my road, we would form a soccer team and in that soccer team I would have kids from other roads play against me. So, I got to know people from other roads in Cato. And the kids from the other roads would not just be friends with the kids from my road, they would have friends from other different roads. And these other friends would sometimes come over to play soccer with us so I would get to know them, so on and so on. Eventually I just got to know almost everyone in Cato. I mean, I am a people person, so I have friends from all over this area. I find myself with people from different roads all the time. You are in a community when you are in Cato, and you can learn a lot of things from being in this particular community. Like you learn a lot about unity, the elders can teach you a lot about the history of this place and how it was discovered. You also make a lot of friends. Each and every road is important to me, there is no place or road that have not play a part in my life growing up. Everything about this place makes me happy, there is never a time where I feel left out. I have a

<sup>11</sup> “Instagram” is a social media platform where people share pictures with captions, much like Facebook.

lot of friends through childhood experiences that make this place special. It is my comfort zone. My happy place. I would never want to live anywhere else.”

I remember the first night I moved into Cato Manor. I had just finished dinner and was in the process of unpacking my suitcase when Sifiso came to my door. He had rounded up some of the other members of my program and wanted to take us all on a walk through the neighborhood. Eager to learn more about the place I was living in, I grabbed my phone and my house key and said bye to my Mama as I left my house. The night was warm, and the air felt fresh on my skin. I was excited but overwhelmed, I did not understand how all of the streets connected and I was worried that I would not be able to find my way back Home. But I felt safe around Sifiso, and I listened to him tell the stories of the people living in each house that we passed. It was truly amazing to hear him talk about each and every person, as if they were all part of his family. I thought back to what Nowell et al. found about the relationship between identity and place, that their “participants conveyed enduring relationships to their community that had evolved over time through the accumulation of place-based memories. Landmarks and community spaces that participants associated with their own histories in the community. At their root, these stories suggested that some community landmarks were meaningful to the members of the community today because they held an important place in their past” (Nowell et al., 2006, p.35). I found this to be true with Sifiso’s relationship to the hilly streets of Cato Manor. I did not notice it when I was walking with him, but after interviewing him I realized that the emotion he displayed during that walk was more than joy or happiness, it was pride. He was proud to show us around his Home, he was proud to tell us stories of the streets he grew up on, but most importantly, he was proud of his Cato roots. This was the third lesson I learned from Sifiso: to be proud of my roots. I just hope that one day, I too can look back and proudly tell the story of where I came from, of what I call Home.

Sifiso finished the interview with asking me what the word “Home” meant to me.

“Oh, come on Sifiso,” I said jokingly, “Home can be any and everything!”

“Ha! I suppose you are right. Home means different things to everyone,” he replied back.

“I guess I am still trying to find my own definition of Home, but once I figure it out, I’ll let you know,” I said back, aware that my final interview was coming to an end.

Sifiso and I exchanged our parting words and the phone line went dead. I felt a chill run through my body as I smiled a smile of pure content and, before I became aware of it, I found

myself reminiscing back to the days in which I lived in Cato, walking up and down Gardens Road, laughing with the children, and smiling at the Mamas. Home.

*So, what is Home? Home is a place where you feel like you can be unapologetically yourself. And, I guess by that definition, a person can have multiple Homes. I suppose I find some sense of a Home in Niwot, New Orleans, and Cato Manor, but also with my person, Sarah Lebold, for I have found that I can be unapologetically myself with all of these places and people.*

*I suppose I am now working to find a Home within myself.*

## **Same Mirror, Different Reflection**

### **Niwot, Colorado**

As I sit at my childhood desk, looking out of my room at the wonderful Rocky Mountains, I cannot help but think about the quote I opened this story with, the quote from Ellis and Bochner about turning “a story told into a story analyzed” (2006, p. 440). It is my sincere hope that I *told* these stories instead of *analyzed* them, for I have no right to analyze any story but my own. As Hendry (2007, p. 495) says, “Treating stories as objects of study is I would argue a violation of the sacredness of humanity. It is an unethical act.” Stories are meant to be told, not analyzed, and although I can try, I cannot possibly summarize the story of everything I have learned about myself, about the six individuals I interviewed, and about what I have learned about myself from the six individuals I interviewed. During this process, I grew in more ways than I thought I ever could. I interviewed six individuals who live exactly 9,875 miles away from me (that’s 15892.27 kilometers for all of you metric system users) and despite growing up halfway around the world from each other, I learned that the ways these individuals form and come to understand their own identities is more similar than not to how I have learned to form my own. “*Ubuntu: I am because we are, we are because I am, an always active and everchanging equilibrium*” (Atkins, Personal Journal, 22 January 2020). The world may be big, but in the end, we are all human beings, and we need each other.

As the sun starts to set, slowly falling behind the Rocky Mountains, I find myself staring into my bathroom mirror as I brush my teeth. *Who am I? Who is the reflection staring back at me?* I wonder to myself. I think back to the time before South Africa, the time before I met

Sarah, the time when my life was small, never leaving the town of Niwot, Colorado. It is funny, I made a full circle, now living back in my childhood Home as I wait out the COVID-19 pandemic. But, while my house is the same, the reflection of the girl is not. The reflection of high school Sydney was naïve, she thought she was perfect, thought she was sure of who she was, and thought she was never going to change. She was completely unaware of just how lost she would be as soon as she stepped outside of her hometown bubble. But the Sydney looking back at me now is different. She has lived through the ebb and flow of life. She has experienced feeling lost, feeling sad, and feeling alone, but from those feelings, she has also experienced feeling love, feeling joy and happiness, and feeling like she has a place in this big world. But if I can take any one thing away from the different reflections I have seen in this mirror, it is that I am always growing and will continue to grow, and I have the messiness of life to thank for that growth and change. The next time I find myself in this Home looking in this mirror, I will have changed again, and that is okay. In fact, I would not have it any other way.

Life is messy, but I may not be as lost as I once thought, in fact, I may just be learning to celebrate the beauty in the mess instead of worrying about cleaning it up.

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## Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Consent form that was read to participants before starting the interviews

**SIT Study Abroad**

a program of World Learning



### ***PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT TEMPLATE***

Title of the Study: An Autoethnographic Exploration of how Place Influences Identity Formation

Researcher Name: Sydney Atkins

*My name is Sydney Atkins I am a student with the SIT Community Health and Social Policy program.*

*I would like to invite you to participate in a study. (I am conducting a study project as part of the SIT Study Abroad program in Durban). Your participation is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy of this form.*

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between your identity and where you live, through the lens of *Ubuntu*.

### **STUDY PROCEDURES**

Your participation will consist of one internet facilitated interview. In this interview you will answer questions regarding your identity. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. With your permission, you will be audio-recorded on a password-protected device. You may still participate in this study if you do not wish to be audio-recorded

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study and no penalties should you choose not to participate; participation is voluntary. During the interview you have the right to not answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time. I also encourage you to ask me questions related to the questions I am asking you.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Participants in this study will benefit by being able to talk to an individual outside of their families during this time of isolation. This could be refreshing to my participants and will allow them to feel a tighter human connection between me and them. This is a really helpful idea during this time of lockdown.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will maintain confidentiality by assuring participants are alone when answering questions, or that they are comfortable being overheard by anyone else in the same space. I will check in frequently with participants to ensure they are comfortable and not stressed by my interview process. Participants may refuse to answer a question if they feel it is too invasive to their privacy. I will make sure I do not include any identifying descriptions within my research paper. I will also be changing the names of the participants in my final paper. All recorded interviews will be kept on a password-protected device and all other transcribed data will be placed on a password-protected computer. Recorded interviews will be deleted immediately after data analysis. Only I, Sydney Atkins, will have access to the recorded and transcribed data. Only after participants' identities are anonymized will other institutions and individuals have access to my final report. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no identifiable information will be used.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

*Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.*

“I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.”

*Participant's signature* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date* \_\_\_\_\_

*Researcher's signature* \_\_\_\_\_ *Date* \_\_\_\_\_

***Consent to Quote from Interview***

I may wish to quote from the interview with you either in the presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym (fake name) will be used in order to protect your identity

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to allow Sydney to quote my interview

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to allow Sydney to quote my interview

***Consent to Audio-Record Interview***

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I agree to be voice-recorded during my interview

\_\_\_\_\_ (initial) I do not agree to be voice recorded during my interview

**RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at [satkins2@tulane.edu](mailto:satkings2@tulane.edu) or my advisor at [clive.bruzas@sit.edu](mailto:clive.bruzas@sit.edu)

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by an SIT Study Abroad Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the Institutional Review Board at:

School for International Training  
 Institutional Review Board  
 1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676  
 Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676 USA  
[irb@sit.edu](mailto:irb@sit.edu)  
 802-258-3132

## **Appendix 2: Interview Guides**

When I am asking these questions please do not hesitate to give longer answers. Your answers do not need to be short, in fact I encourage you to give examples or tell stories whenever possible when answering these questions.

### Community

1. What does the word “Home” mean to you?
2. How long have you lived in Cato Manor?
3. How do you feel about living in Cato Manor?
  - a. Are you happy to be living there?
  - b. Are you unhappy?
  - c. Would you rather be living somewhere else?
  - d. Do you think of Cato as your Home?
4. What makes you happy (or unhappy) about living in Cato? (EXAMPLES)
5. Do you feel that living in Cato is a part of who you are?
  - a. If no can you explain why? Can you share a story about why Cato does not feel like part of who you are?

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: If participants have not mention anything about relationships at this point, ask something like:

How do you get along with other residents in Cato?

In what ways are these relationships important (or not) to you?

### Identity

1. Do you think that you have changed as a person during the time you have lived in Cato?
  - a. Can you explain in what ways you have changed?
  - b. Can you share any stories about the ways you have changed (or why you think you have not changed)?
2. In what ways do you think that living in Cato has influenced/contributed to these changes?
3. How would you describe yourself to someone who does not know you?
  - a. What are your best qualities?
  - b. What are you most proud of?
  - c. What would you like to be better at?
4. Is there anything that you are working toward in life?

5. Do you think you have a clear purpose in your life?
6. How would you answer the question “who are you?”

**Appendix 3: Consent to Use of Independent Study Project***Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP*

Student Name: Sydney Atkins

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Email Address: satkins2@tulane.edu

---

Title of ISP/FSP: An Autoethnographic Exploration of how Place Influences Identity Formation

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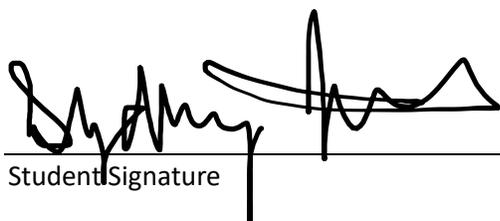
Program and Term/Year: SIT Community Health and Social Policy Spring 2020

---

Student research (Independent Study Project, Field Study Project) is a product of field work and as such students have an obligation to assess both the positive and negative consequences of their field study. Ethical field work, as stipulated in the SIT Policy on Ethics, results in products that are shared with local and academic communities; therefore copies of ISP/FSPs are returned to the sponsoring institutions and the host communities, at the discretion of the institution(s) and/or community involved.

By signing this form, I certify my understanding that:

1. I retain ALL ownership rights of my ISP/FSP project and that I retain the right to use all, or part, of my project in future works.
2. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad may publish the ISP/FSP in the SIT Digital Collections, housed on World Learning's public website.
3. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad may archive, copy, or convert the ISP/FSP for non-commercial use, for preservation purposes, and to ensure future accessibility.
  - World Learning/SIT Study Abroad archives my ISP/FSP in the permanent collection at the SIT Study Abroad local country program office and/or at any World Learning office.
  - In some cases, partner institutions, organizations, or libraries in the host country house a copy of the ISP/FSP in their own national, regional, or local collections for enrichment and use of host country nationals.
4. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad has a non-exclusive, perpetual right to store and make available, including electronic online open access, to the ISP/FSP.
5. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad websites and SIT Digital Collections are publicly available via the Internet.
6. World Learning/SIT Study Abroad is not responsible for any unauthorized use of the ISP/FSP by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.
7. I have sought copyright permission for previously copyrighted content that is included in this ISP/FSP allowing distribution as specified above.



Student Signature

March 17, 2020

Date

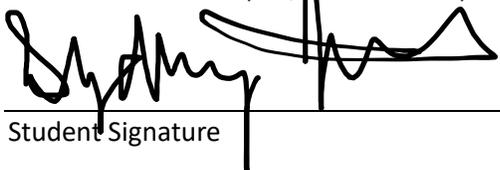
**Withdrawal of Access, Use, and Publication of ISP/FSP**

Given your agreement to abide by the SIT Policy on Ethics, withdrawing permission for publication may constitute an infringement; the Academic Director will review to ensure ethical compliance.

I hereby withdraw permission for World Learning/SIT Study Abroad to include my ISP/FSP in the Program's office permanent collection. Reason:

I hereby withdraw permission for World Learning/SIT Study Abroad to release my ISP/FSP in any format to individuals, organizations, or libraries in the host country for educational purposes as determined by World Learning/SIT Study Abroad. Reason:

I hereby withdraw permission for World Learning/SIT Study Abroad to publish my ISP/FSP on its websites and in any of its digital/electronic collections, or to reproduce and transmit my ISP/FSP electronically. Reason:



Student Signature

March 17, 2020

Date

Academic Director has reviewed student reason(s) for withdrawing permission to use and agrees it does not violate the SIT Study Abroad Policy on Ethics.

**Appendix 4:** Human Subjects Review Form

**SIT Study Abroad**

School for International Training



Human Subjects Review  
*LRB/IRB ACTION FORM*

<p>Name of Student: Sydney Atkins</p> <p>ISP/Internship Title: Found in the World: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How Place Influences the Growing Formation of One's Identity</p> <p>Date Submitted: 30 March 2020</p> <p>Program: SFH Durban Community Health &amp; Social Policy</p> <p>Type of review: Check exempt or expedited</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: 5 January 2021</p> <p>LRB members (print names): Robin Joubert PhD Clive Bruzas PhD John McGladdery</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: </p> <p>Date: 30 March 2020</p>
--	---

**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