

Holiday essay: 'Christmas in Liberia, Christmas at Home,' by Shannon Gibney

Curl up and read this tale by Minnesota writer Shannon Gibney as you celebrate the season.

By Shannon Gibney Special to the Star Tribune



KERRY HYNDMAN

We hadn't been back to Liberia, the tiny coastal country where we had met and fallen in love, in seven years. Not since we married, had three children and shackled up in a small house in south Minneapolis; not since Ballah had gotten his MBA while enduring too many menial jobs; not since one of our babies had died; not since we had almost broken countless times under the weight of a cross-cultural relationship and all of its precarious expectations.

We hadn't been back to Liberia for so long, we were starting to believe that the idea of it was the same thing as the actual smell, taste, feel, sound, sight of it. This was inconvenient for me, the mother of two Liberian-American children. I wanted Boisey, then 5, and Marwein, then 1, to know both sides of their heritage.

But contemplating the return was a far deeper quandary for Ballah. Born in Monrovia, he'd lived the first 26 years of his life there, and had envisioned growing old there. For Ballah, "home" began with Liberia, regardless of where it might end. It was a place where he was not divided. He was not "Liberian and American," "Black American and Liberian"; he was simply a normal Liberian man.

Knowing that his parents had never met their beloved grandchildren, whom they Skyped with almost every week, was making me ill with guilt, especially considering that the kids saw my parents in Michigan regularly. And my feet itched with the desire to walk across unfamiliar ground once more, to be on unmoored footing for a spell. Life in the so-called First World had many advantages, but one thing it consistently lacked was a clear view of the rest of the world. I had been lucky enough to travel and to learn this. In the end, for all these reasons and so many others, Ballah and I began preparations for an expensive return to a homeland on one side, and a visit from well-meaning strangers bound by love and difference on the other.

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Picture a 2,400-square-foot house with huge bay windows, a loft that looks over a spacious living room in which the centerpiece is a 30-foot Christmas tree shining with colorful lights and ornaments. The house sits 15 minutes from a midsize Midwestern college town. With the snow blowing onto the porch and tall pine trees stationed along the walk to the front door, you might believe for a minute that you are in the middle of the woods. It is so quiet, so peaceful. My parents built this house when I was 12. They poured all their resources and heart and soul into it, in order to build what they call their dream house.

Holiday story

This week, when families come together for the winter holidays, we offer this special story by Shannon Gibney, written for the Star Tribune. Gibney is a writer, educator and activist in Minneapolis. Her novel "See No Color" won a 2016 Minnesota Book Award, and her new young-adult novel, "Dream Country," will be published in 2018.

"It's basically a five-star hotel that I don't have to pay for, and where people occasionally bother me but mostly leave me alone to recover from what life has done to me back in the real world," I tell my girlfriends. They laugh, remembering the pictures of walnut-crusted walleye and garlic mashed potatoes I've texted them. Behold! My unabashed bourgie privilege! I wrote them. Yes, I was raised by upper-middle-class white people whose culinary skills are unmatched. See my shame, as I savor the most delicious fish I have ever tasted. And I don't even like fish. All of this is why, ever since I can remember, the thought of spending holidays at home has instantly lifted me.

In the midst of clearing out my locker before winter break in high school: Tonight I can start the dough for five different kinds of holiday cookies, all the while belting out John Denver and the Muppets!

In the center of a hurricane of final exams in college: Soon I will be sitting by the fire with Dad in my reindeer pajamas, talking about how he picked out this year's tree.

Grading a mountain of student papers: Once I get this done, I can camp out in the basement with my brother and watch "Battlestar Galactica" for hours, only taking breaks to get sandwiches and lemonade and chips and heated-up frozen pizzas.

Going home for Christmas is a ritual that I don't even recognize as such, ingrained as it is into my psyche. It is just "what you do," during the holidays, a place of snow and green and wood where you retreat to rediscover your better self. It wasn't until college that I realized that not everyone had that. It wasn't until we stepped off that last plane in Monrovia that I knew that giving up something — even temporarily — isn't really giving it up if it helps you find its value.

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On Christmas Day in Liberia we get up, bathe, dress and wait for one of Ballah's brothers to come to pick us up. They take us to his parents' house in Red Light, a suburb outside of the city. Ballah's mother will have plates of torbogee, a traditional Loma dish made from cassava leaves, waiting for us in small bowls covered with plates on the table. She asks one of the small boys to run down the street and fetch some cold bottled water.

Ballah sits outside on the concrete back porch with his brothers, sisters and parents, as well as friends who have heard he has come back to visit, and talk about the newest corrupt government schemes, how hard it is to find someone who can actually do what they promised to do in this country, who is looking for a decent job and who has found one, and the programs going on at the church his parents helped to found years ago.

I try to keep track of Boisey, who is running all over the dirt-filled front yard with two girls from next door, seemingly oblivious to the constant stream of cars and motorbikes driving over the makeshift paths through the neighborhood and on the busy street in front of the house. Even with his "thick accent" and "bright skin," our son makes friends easily here. I think it is due to his belief that kids — no matter their background or situation — were made to be played with.

Marwein, on the other hand, is completely overwhelmed by the many strangers who want to hold and touch her. She spends most of her time climbing into my lap, or screaming if she doesn't see me. People say she is shy, but I know she just doesn't trust people she doesn't know. Her name means "My Stranger," or "My Guest" in Loma. This was in honor of her sister, Siannah, who died for unknown reasons shortly before I gave birth to her, because as Ballah said,

“Siannah came as a stranger, and she left as a stranger.” Here in Liberia, Marwein is definitely living up to her name.

Later, there is Christmas mass with people packed in a hot, humid sanctuary. Everyone sways to the music the accomplished band plays, voices uplifted and resonant. Raised a Christian but now identifying as a Buddhist, I try to be ecumenical and celebrate the connections between the faiths. I see how the church gives scholarships to pay for kids’ school fees. I note the guitarist and bass player in the band offer free lessons to anyone interested. People find ways to reach their goals using whatever people or institutions will support them. The church here is in many ways the strongest institution, so the social support it offers is significant. I can appreciate that.

Being a woman congregant, I am expected to wrangle the children, to comfort them and make sure they are not getting into anything they shouldn’t be. I try not to resent this unequal expectation. I am about as successful in this project as I am back home.

When I gather the laundry for the small girl who does our wash, Ballah will scold me for including my underwear: You need to wash it yourself. Culturally, women don’t expose their panties in public here. They usually don’t hang on the line, but wash and dry them in the bathroom. I gasp. How come yours can be included then? He shrugs. I am a man. I bowl over laughing, and he looks at me curiously. Yes, I have known how it is for women and girls in Africa, but it’s a whole different thing when you know how it is.

Being a light-skinned foreigner, just about anything I do will be seen as both acceptable and strange here. I am exotic — a Black American who married a Liberian and came back with their children to visit. People stare at us everywhere. It is exhausting. I long for the anonymity of home, to walk down a street without gawkers.

Doors open for me on the not-unfounded assumption that I have money to pay for such special service. These doors are slammed in Ballah’s face. I withdraw money at the Lebanese-owned supermarket. Ballah is shrugged off when he makes the same request. At the internet cafe, I get extra time. Ballah is booted off. Even though he is “home” and a Liberian citizen, there is precious little this citizenship buys him. The U.S. passports the kids and I possess get us through every line and checkpoint in record time. Ballah still has a Liberian passport, which makes everything take twice as long. The only currency he has is in his relationships. This is significant, especially in a culture that values them highly, but it will only get you so far.

We go swimming a few times during our visit, an activity that is antithetical to me during Christmas. We head to a resort that is popular with expats. The swimming pool is gorgeous, with a small upper level that Marwein insists I pull her around in and a larger lower level where Boisey splashes with Ballah and his uncles. Most Liberians could not afford to come here. When we take a break, we sit around fine wooden tables shaded by umbrellas made of palm fronds. We order expensive food. Some of it is Liberian — Palava sauce or goat soup with rice; most of it is

American — chicken wings and leafy green salad. When we finish, we change into dry clothes and feel instantly refreshed. Then we get back into the car to drive back to the compound, and the heat makes us hot and sticky again.

Later, I let Marwein and Boisey go in the Atlantic Ocean, having instructed Uncle Henry to stay close to Boisey at all times. Then I clasp Marwein's hand tightly as she swings over the sea, never once loosening my grip as her toes kiss the surf. Liberians talk about water spirits in the Atlantic that will pull you under without warning. I call it "the undertow," but whatever name you have for it, it is to be respected, especially among children. This ocean already holds far too many bones of Africans.

I don't have time to miss my family back in Ann Arbor, gathered around the hearth, eating popcorn and watching bad holiday movies. Caring for the kids in a country where the majority of its citizens don't have their basic needs met, I don't have space in my brain to imagine curling up with a book in the loft of my parents' house, hearing them laugh with my children. Every bit of my energy is directed to things like trying to talk to my in-laws, even when our respective accents form invisible but impermeable walls between us, and to finding the ingredients to make spaghetti for my son, who loves eating African food at home, but not every moment of every day in Liberia.

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I am 22 and alone. I am just out of college on a fellowship, walking the long S of an ocher dirt road in Ghana. This is my first trip to the continent, and it has been difficult. I have been called obruni, and every other kind of name for white person and foreigner available to West African tongues. The food here is a sticky, pasty, greasy substance called fufu. It does not agree with me, and by the time I return home, I will weigh just 107 pounds — less than I weighed at 13. But that is not what's bothering me now, wandering around the bush outside the northern Ghanaian city of Wa. I can't stop thinking about my brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles at the piano, singing Christmas songs. I keep envisioning cool, wet snowflakes landing on my cheeks, dissolving in an instant. I want to have this adventure and learn something about myself and the world, but if I'm honest, what I want more is a quilted blanket on the couch in my parents' living room with the icicles hanging from branches just outside the huge bay windows. The ache in my gut threatens to engulf me.

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It is almost a year after our return.

The kids and I are home, and Ballah is somewhere in the space between "home" and "away." The kids live in the house with me, and Ballah has found an apartment a few blocks away. We have finally broken. We are back; we are different and the same.

Boisey, Marwein and I will make the drive to Ann Arbor in December and get the chance to spend another Christmas at my parents' house. We will make angels and snowmen, build Lego monstrosities with my brothers and their kids, drink hot chocolate by the fire. In our own way, each of us will let the memory of last year's Christmas in Liberia color every new memory we create there.

Maybe Boisey will ask my mother to cook snails as well as shrimp on Christmas Eve. Maybe Marwein will scream at the top of her lungs, running around the house with her brother, remembering in some pre-verbal part of her body chasing back the edge of the Atlantic while hanging from her mother's arm. Maybe I will let myself linger in the space of difference, love and loss, watching the all-encompassing history of nations swell in me in one moment, and the intimate history of a family from many homes rest in another.

Shannon Gibney's new novel is "Dream Country," the saga of five generations of a Liberian and Liberian-American family. It will be published by Dutton in 2018. She lives in Minneapolis with her children.