

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHONDA BUCHANAN (2015)

**By: Marika Bolden, Etchings Literary and Fine Arts Magazine,
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Q. Where do you think most of your inspiration comes from?

A. My family. My daughter. I write about the people closest to me because I care about our interactions. I care about how we treat each other or have treated each other in the past. And I want our interactions to be better. More balanced. Filled with love and understanding and compassion.

I write about the things that need to be changed in this world for the betterment of humanity. I think it is my desire for compassion, for myself as well as others. This attempt is intrinsic in all of my poetry. Maybe because of the people who, when I was growing up, seemed not to have compassion for others around them. I think I'm always writing with this child's sense of what that looks like, or rather can look like, if we communicate with each other with respect. I'm not perfect. I sometimes yell at the driver going slow in front of me like everybody else, but at the same time I try to check myself. I say, "That driver is not your problem. They probably have something going on that you do not know about. Or they're just a terrible driver. It's not the end of the world. It is not a tsunami. It is not Hurricane Katrina. I'm just driving a car on a road, just like everybody else, trying to get to my destination. You did not lose a limb today or your home. Step back." Really, poetry is a way of checking myself.

Q. What do you do to get around writer's block?

A. I don't get writer's block. I have the opposite problem. I have too much to write about. My problem is finding the time to sit down and to let the characters of one story or the moments of one poem come through me, through my fingers.

Q. Where is your favorite place to sit down and write?

A. That is a truly hard question. I like to write anywhere. When I was in England in 2008, in Bath, England, I used to write in Queen Victoria's Royal Garden on a secluded cement bench deep in the garden. When I was a kid growing up I would write on my front porch, sitting on the ledge and just watching things happen around me. Sometimes, I'd sit in one of our weeping willow branches and write in the tree. I can write at my desk. The bed. Again, the location isn't the problem. Finding the silence and the time to write where I don't feel guilty about taking myself out of family moments, or removing myself from my family, that is the difficulty.

Q. Who are a few of your favorite and/or more influential authors? Why?

A. Toni Morrison would be one of my favorite author for so many reasons. She unearthed the slave narrative, the black woman's story, the black man, black child's story. Song of Solomon is probably my favorite book of hers. Beloved is also one of my favorite books. But all of her work has this authentic texture of African American life and realistic moments that we deal with, encounter, have struggled to overcome, and quite frankly, are still hidden in our subconscious. Other favorite writers Edwidge Danitcat, Amy Tan, Ruth Forman, Sharon Olds, Lucille Clifton, Mary Karr, Jewel Parker Rhodes, Isabel Allende, oh men, Ernest Gaines, Li-Young Lee, Yusef Komunyakaa. William Henry Lewis. So many others.

Q. What are the Intersections between gospel music, Native American singing and poetry in your writing?

A. I one saw the documentary where a famous American Indian singer, a woman whose name I forget, said that gospel came from the intersection of the first slaves and American Indians in America. It came from, she said, their blues, their sorrow and suffering and at the same time, their shared experiences as survivors. This had to be over 20 years ago. But the Mvskoke Creek Indians' from Oklahoma sing beautiful hymns that sound exactly like old Negro spirituals.

In my poetry the two are inseparable. I think because of my Baptist background, I always lean towards the expression of an emotion through song. Most often that sound comes out in a gospel or a moan. I honestly do not make a conscious effort to make my song poems, or written poems, sound like gospel music. It just rises in me like that. However, American Indian songs are not chanting. American Indian songs I sing in between my poems are either intonation with meaning connected to them or behind the sound, or a prayer song, and other times the songs are actually language. Songs I learned on as a singer on three American Indian drums. So it would be wrong to call American Indian music chanting although it sounds like chanting to the untrained and non-traditional ear. I include songs to establish that sacred space and for emotional impact.

Q. Has your idea of what poetry is changed since you began writing poems?

A. I don't think my idea of poetry has changed since I first started writing when I was 8 or 9. When I was younger, I used words to express myself in a world that didn't want to hear how a little black girl felt. As an adult, I am using words to express myself in a world that sometimes doesn't want to hear what a black woman or Indian woman feels. That has not changed for me.

We can look at what happened in South Carolina where that police officer flipped that black girl out of her desk in the classroom. I don't know the story behind that moment but she did not deserve that.

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There had to be something happening with her that led to this moment before that police officer put his hands on her like that. But what was she feeling to be “disruptive” in class? No child, no woman, no boy in a high school classroom deserves that kind of treatment. Did anyone take the time to hear what she was feeling before that? Many African Americans and bi-racial people still experience this covert sense of devaluation in our society. I would write about that incident and maybe I will write about it, but this last year and a half of incidences and the violence against black people has kind of shut me down. I can't even open that writing vein right now. I will one day soon but not now. It's too fresh, much too fresh.

Q. What advice do you have for aspiring poets?

A. My advice for young poets remains constant -- try to write every day. Try to write the truth of your own life first. Try to be as authentic as possible in your language and your vision for your poem. Don't be easy on yourself. Don't let flat images or shallow language or explicit words alone express your feelings. Try to find the image of the idea or a thought for the emotion that hasn't been expressed before in that

particular way that you see yourself it or heard it. Tell the truth the way that you see it, as beautiful or as ugly as you see it. Tell your story. Tell the truth.