

# Pave the Road by Walking: An Interview with Meri Nana Ama Danquah

by Abena A-T, posted to *Tempo Africa* on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2012

A good cultural critic should be observant, honest, and prepared to receive comments that range from agreement to admiration to admonishment. Author, speaker and freelance journalist Meri Nana-Ama Danquah writes, "The View from Here", a weekly cultural critique found in *The Daily Graphic* every Friday. Danquah uses personal narrative with a touch of self-depreciation and humor "to get people to look at the various sides of a certain issue and hopefully inspire dialogue about that issue within the community."

## Admiration and Admonishment

Inspire dialogue she does. She once wrote about her dislike for fake flowers and how hard it is to find fresh cut flowers to buy in Ghana even from a florist. To this, one reader commented: 'You expect too much from life woman!' Another remarked that the website where her articles are found on the weekend should be publishing something more serious. Danquah laughs in amusement recalling these comments. But whether people approve or disapprove of her views, she remains fascinated by people's interpretations of her articles and how they embrace it in their own way. "I just kind of am always amazed at the responses that I get."

Danquah, whose latest anthology, *The Black Body*, explores the myths, insecurities and intrigue surrounding the bodies of Black folk, is not afraid of offending readers. "When you write non-fiction, you can't be afraid of offending people... The things you think are safe i.e.) writing about flowers, might be the very thing that pisses somebody off and the things that you think will really upset people, you realize they don't really care or else they'll just say 'thank god you put that.'" She feels that at some point, every writer faces the critical decision of either honoring her creative impulse or being a captive to others' opinions. "You'll never really truly write what's in your spirit to write if you're always worried about who's reading it and what they're going to think." There is one boundary the author won't cross which is to use her writing to attack or vilify a particular individual. She says that as long as she's in line with her moral boundaries she feels comfortable speaking her truth in a responsible and artistic way.



## God Protects Babies and Fools

Though the accomplished author and mother has been writing her entire life, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah never intended to write professionally. "People didn't have the opportunity to say to me 'do you know how hard this will be?' Because I never really went out and said I'm pursuing this. I just sort of did it and things happened because I was doing it." For her, expressing the desire to become a writer just one generation ago garnered responses such as: 'What do you mean you want to be a writer? Choose something solid. Choose a career!' While writing is finally becoming a viable career for Black women in the Americas, Ghana and other African countries, she says people will still fight you on the decision. She tells her students not to be afraid and not let other people's fears become their own. She is very supportive of her own daughter, who attends an Ivy League U.S. university pursuing a theatre arts degree.

## A Grain of Salt

Danquah has received accolades for her work from literary greats such as author and poet, Maya Angelou. When asked about whether she was flattered by Angelou's compliments, Danquah gives a rather pragmatic answer: "Obviously there's a real sense of self-pride but you can't get too comfortable. If you listen to all that sort of congratulatory stuff that people say, then you have to give equal weight to the damning and awful stuff people say." She does admit to feeling that spark of excitement, you can't cling onto it. Likewise with harsh critiques, they sting but also must be let go. "It can't crush you" she says, "It can't stop you from writing."

It all comes back to being true to yourself. Danquah says that "if you're called to write about something, particularly if you're trading new ground, people will *not* understand. But you go anyway and you pave that road and you pave it by walking." With such works as the memoir *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey through Depression* and the anthology *The Shaking Tree*, a writing career for Danquah, appears to be a path well tread.