

You're probably reading this essay expecting it to be about a time I studied abroad and experienced something new. A time I went on a retreat and not only impacted the people of some hard-to-pronounce village, but was ultimately impacted for a lifetime. An instance where I took the time to talk to someone with a thick foreign accent and left the conversation with a new perspective. These experiences should have been enough to "broaden my horizons", "align my chakras" or whatever cliché is associated with traveling. Any of these instances would be sufficient enough to explain how my international experience has shaped the way I now view the world. And not to diminish the value of these instances, because they are well in their right, but I must confess this essay will be a bit more cynical. While privileged to not only visit a foreign country, I am granted an opportunity to trace my ancestral lineage. Some would say this makes me "worldly". I should know that Africa is a continent, not a country. I should advocate for immigration. Value the opportunity America has set before me. Heck, you probably would assume if allowed I'd reelect Obama because he was "the best thing that ever happened for minorities since Clinton". Presumptuous to say the least. Whether my international experience has positively or negatively contributed to how I perceive the world is debatable. What I will use the rest of this essay to talk about is how my international experience has shaped my identity and more often than not, forced me to question where in the world I fit.

Your name should be the first step to your identity. It's what your friends call you, what you answer to, it's who you are. My name was where I first questioned my identity. My name is Oluwatobiloba, and while generally considered a unique name, it's actually a pretty common name in Nigeria. After hearing my name called on roll, my classmates labeled me as "African". I would nearly exasperate myself by explaining that I couldn't be African because I wasn't born there, I was born here, in America. I anticipated Fourth of July just as much as they did. I was just as affected when 9/11 occurred. I thought this was enough proof. Need I bring in my birth certificate?

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It wasn't until after learning about the horrors of the slave trade, that my classmates accepted me as American. I had to be American because I wasn't forced here on a ship. Like I had previously said, I was born here. I was finally one of them. But by then, I was coming into myself. I was learning about my culture and the traditions that followed. Stories of the American Revolution, while triumphant, were not enough. How could I ignore my Nigerian nationality when its history was colored with heroes like Funmilayo Kuti, Ayinde Barrister, places like Ojuelegba. It seemed I couldn't call myself American because it wasn't enough for me. But just because I loved the culture didn't mean I could ignore my birthplace. Like the Rachel Dozeal scandal proves; loving a culture, endearing a culture, partaking in a culture doesn't grant you a birthright.

Well if being American wasn't good enough for me. And loving Nigeria wasn't enough to grant me citizenship, then what was I?

I guess an easy place to start off would be my race. Because of the concentration of melanin in my skin I could describe myself as being black. I endure as much marginalization as there is contested to be in America. If ever described by the police I would be identified as a "black female". But even that facet of my identity perplexes me. I know I'm black on the surface but deeper than that sometimes I feel like I don't meet up with what it means to be black in America. I cannot always relate to popular media, I get lost at particular cultural references and an even bigger privilege; I can trace my ancestral lineage. Within the black community, this is a big deal. It introduces perceived tensions between African immigrants and Black Americans. Can Black Americans appropriate African customs? Is it fair for Africans to believe they are superior because they were advantaged to knowing their origins? I don't know the answers to these questions because it's not as simple as yes or no.

These circumstances, instances and lingering questions have proved to me that I don't have a single identity from which my worldview and perspective is framed. I cannot sum up my international

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experience in a narrative. It would be an injustice to claim that one event shaped how I view the world. It did not take one single international experience to dictate how I view the world. It is an ongoing process that I tackle every day. Learning a different piece of history from either side, whether Nigeria or America influences how I view the world.

Whether you choose to force a hyphen between the words "African" and "American", or insist on a slash between African American and Black. My experience is specific to me. It is an international experience that I take pride in regardless of how divisive it makes me feel at times. It is a lifetime journey that no one-way ticket could purchase.