

“Black Sheep” Lowell Speech

For most of you who know me, you know that I’m an East Asian Studies major and passionate sinophile. My frequent trips to China have given me a few labels, “Waiguoren,” (foreigner), “Laowai” slang for foreigner, and “Feizhouren” or African person. For most of my life, I never felt that my race dictated my day-to-day experiences. But traveling to China made me more and more conscious of my racial difference.

Two summers ago I travelled to Beijing for Harvard’s language study program. I was walking through the beautiful Qinghua Campus when a man made a bee-line for me. “Hi! So you are from Africa right?” “Haha, no no,” I replied. “Oh so your parents are from Africa,” he persisted. I said, “no.” Now he was both confused and annoyed, so I helped him out, “Okay so maybe my great great great great grandfather was from Jamaica.” “Jamaica.” he said, “Oh! Usaine Bolt! You like running!?” “No.”

After that conversation I reflected on my four previous visits to the country. “Is this all they see? A person from Africa who might be a sprinter?” I don’t mind that people think I am from Africa. But the expectations that come with the label trouble me. It seemed like for some, being from Africa meant being exotic, good at basketball, listening to hip hop and dancing. I could see this man’s disappointment that I was none of these things.

I felt like a black sheep. I so wanted to be accepted by the people around me. I could speak like them, write like them, and I even play the Chinese violin. I’m not trying to be Chinese. I am not trying *not* to be African. I’m just trying to be me and enjoy myself. What’s wrong with that?

My trips became motivated by vendettas; I wanted to return so that I could prove them wrong, “Hey! I’m not just an African, I speak Chinese, too!” Paranoia plagued me, *why did the waiter ask my white friend to order for the table instead of me? Why are those people staring at me? Maybe I will stay in this weekend.*

So, why do I keep going back? In fact, what is a black girl from Dallas, Texas, doing in China anyway?

The answer came to me one day this summer. I spent the summer volunteering on Qinghai Lake, a popular remote tourist destination. Of the 50 volunteers, there were two black people, me and Lucy. One day as we sat together on the grass two tourists walked up to Lucy, posed, snapped some pictures, and walked away. “Aren’t you gonna say something!?” We all asked Lucy furiously. “I mean what the hell!? You are a person not some zoo animal!” But she said, “What’s the point? I get mad, yell at them, then they get back on their tour bus thinking that black people are all angry, adding to a stereotype that’s not true.”

At that moment, my mind emptied itself of all the rotten labels that had polluted it. I looked out over the silent, sapphire-colored holy lake and velvety green hills. This was it. *This* was why I came back again and again. I wanted to go back to reignite the excitement the futuristic skyscrapers, whimsically-shaped mountains, and even the crowded subway cars instilled in me. I wanted to re-experience the challenge of navigating through a windy hutong alleyway by myself, traipsing through blocks and blocks of cement towers and chatting with watermelon street vendors. Where did that wonder go?

In my college application essays, I wrote about the long awkward rides on the Beijing subway where I attracted stares left and right. I wrote that I hoped to overcome the label, “waiguoren” literally, “out of country person” and become like the Latin term for foreigner, “advena” or (person who) comes (to stay). But now I think it’s better to forget the labels all together. Forget about being a waiguoren, laowai, or a black sheep. My original fascination with China had nothing to do with race. I fell in love because the *culture* was different, not because the races were different.

I’m not here to fight a war over stereotypes, or cast an entire country of people as racists. I’m here because none of that matters. Why should we let skin-deep differences poison our passions? I went to China all those times for my enjoyment and for me, so I’m just going to be me.