

Lara Welch

And.

Inside the cover of my passport, there are several lines that will be present on every one I'll ever have: my name (Lara-not-Laura, derived from Latin, "award winner"), my date of birth (August 17th, turn of the millennium, summer child), and my nationality (United States of America, bold black letters, my secondhand culture.) These are what everyone can see. They're written on me as clear as if they were lines tattooed across my skin-- they're in the way I talk, my manners, my values. Despite that, there have often been times where I've looked at that third line—nationality—and wondered if there was a typo in there somewhere. I am American, and I have always considered myself American, but I was so often mystified by that word that I counted myself as a "yes, but—" breed of American.

After all, the United States of America is an isolated country. In my experience, few Americans realize how unusual our situation is, that you can drive for thousands of miles and still be in the same country. Compare that to France, the largest country in Western Europe; you could fit France (and a few other small nations) into *Texas*. Living in Belgium was knowing that if I chose a direction and drove for a few hours, I'd either be underwater or in another country. For better or worse, other countries have to deal with far more neighbors than the United States does. What does that isolation mean for Americans overseas?

For me, it means that I uphold the American tradition at our school of being absolutely *horrific* at geography. Some of the students at my international school can rattle off the capitals of Tajikistan, Togo, and Tunisia as easily as they list the days of the week, while I play pin-the-country-on-the-map. This is because while I was taking Civics in 8th grade, my international friends were taking geography. For most Americans, civics is actually more useful than geography, but it's an institutionalized example of the assumption that Americans will stay in America.

I compare that to Model United Nations in Madagascar, where we have eleven different nationalities in a club with fewer than twenty members. It's a full immersion in the international culture

that I've been getting in small doses for my whole life. I get to see America as non-Americans see it. My Foreign Service lifestyle has led me to a vibrant international community, and that has shaped *how* I am *who* I am: how, in the eyes of the world, I am American, no 'buts' about it.

This came as quite a shock to me. I had always set myself in a category set apart from the masses, in a special slot for Americans who had grown up overseas. My childhood was a unique experience that gave me a perspective inaccessible to those who live the life of suburbia, right? For most, brick factories in Bangladesh are less real than sitcom living rooms. What is there to relate to in a story about a family dying from malaria in a distant country? There's a disconnect between seeing and understanding outside of our own experiences, and that's the reason I justified setting myself aside. I was *different*.

These were the times where I felt like that line on my passport was telling a half truth—yes, I was American, but I wasn't one of *those* Americans, with their diet of processed foods and ignorance of how best to sit in a car when going over horse-sized potholes. Yet, as my friends never hesitated to point out, I lived an American lifestyle, no matter how often I wrote it off. I held American values. To this group, most of whom had never lived in the U.S. , it was obvious that I was American; there was no reason to point it out—the sky was blue, math was hard, I was American.

Their assumptions led me to challenge my identity. Just because I was around the international community, did that make me part of it? Did I maintain the isolation of America, even overseas?

I grew up with a view of America that was half home-grown, half-imported. Part of me will always be torn by that, but I've come to realize that my circumstances do not make me any less American. If anything, they bring me back to the roots of the country. I've never been able to escape the American-ness that has often marked me 'foreigner', 'over-opinionated', 'obnoxious',—a brand next to each stamp in my passport-- so I've started opening to those pages first. My opinions are a legacy of free speech, my pride grown from a culture that encourages accomplishment, my foreignness an unbreakable lifeline that will always connect me to home. Using my situation and unique perspective, I can take my place in the international community, and not as a ghost member. I can be aware of my biases and how

the rest of the world might see my actions. I can go further than the “yes, but--” American, and answer the question of nationality with “yes, and--”.

My passport tells a story of growing consciousness and conscientiousness in three lines. It hasn't changed, but the person holding it, thumbing over the pages and triple checking that she hasn't forgotten it, has. Each place had left its mark on my passport, whether it was at the airport or the plane or the hotel room. Likewise, everywhere I've traveled to has left its mark on me; I am a passport of my own.

When I flip open to the first page, I see three lines: my name (Lara-Laura-Clara-Lauren-it's-fine, different in every language, “cheerful”), my birthday (same as my father's, proud millennial, rainy-season child), and my nationality (United States of America, bold black letters, irrevocably part of me). I see the picture of someone who is different for her journey, but is still at her cultural core the same.