

What We Speak of When We Speak of the World

I cannot argue with the idea that the greatest stories are often found within the pages of a passport. My passport is not clean; it is not pretty or in any kind of reasonable condition. There are haphazard arrangements of stamps from Malawi, the United States, Switzerland, Tanzania, Rwanda, Spain, and the corners are tattered with years of use. At this point in my life, travel feels as natural to me as anything. The unfamiliar has become familiar, and I am in love with what this entails. The stories are by far my favorite part - I doubt I'll ever get tired of listening to my friends recount memories from past homes and holidays, from the saltwater crocodile found in Alessandra's swimming pool in Australia to Lascelles and her evacuation from Libya, a country on the cusp of civil war. I love being able to tell a story about climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest freestanding mountain in the world, at the age of fourteen. I like that I lived in a city where you could hear hyenas at night, and that my school has been cancelled for everything from political demonstrations to a president declaring a new public holiday. As a Third Culture Kid who has attended international schools since the age of seven, a global upbringing is something I can genuinely say has had an unequivocal impact on my identity. It is important to consider, however, that the things we learn about ourselves through international travel do not always manifest in the ways we think they will. The best stories can teach us incredible things about ourselves and the world we are creating, but I think it is the mindset we develop through our time overseas that has a lasting effect on our ability to talk about the world.

People often ask me what I've learned from my time living in East Africa, what I've taken from it, the stories it's given me. It's a question that is common around dinner tables at family reunions and in emails from Grandparents, typically paired with an emphasis on how lucky I am to be living this life, seeing all of these wonderful and exotic things.

I have a complicated relationship with these kinds of questions.

On the one hand, I understand them. I agree with them. I know that my years here have been formative in the shaping of my identity, my opinions and my interests. I have been to rural villages, I have seen the grass roofed houses and dusty faces, I know of the inequities between these communities and my own.

But I also despise these questions.

I despise their one-dimensional nature when they ask what I have taken from my time in 'Africa', as if it is a place that exists to teach lessons to the wealthy. Africa is not a country of children in rags, ribs protruding from their sallow skin, put on television as a reminder to finish what's on your plate and to not waste water. I did not move to Africa to learn lessons from it. I recognize my privilege, I recognize the power I hold coming from the upbringing that I do. But treating my years here as a lesson or a charity case denies the complexity of a continent nearly always imagined monolithically.

The media holds an incredible power over this. They have the opportunity to portray Africa truthfully, or to give people the Africa they want to see. We have no qualms making cartoon movies with dynamic animal characters, personified to the point where we scorn any human to do them wrong. Africa's people, in contrast, are starving, ruthless - soldiers with guns strapped to their backs and malice in their gaze. There is no

humanity in them as there is in the animals, only cruelty and misfortune. The white man, of course, is always there to save the day; a twisted Anglo-Saxon deity blessed with a Western intelligence and sophistication, spouting lessons from his civilized upbringing that he uses to be the savior these untamed people so desperately need. Here is a story I can tell you – why the Eurocentric nature of a globalized society is so detrimental to the identities of developing countries.

Ask me questions about my adolescent years in Tanzania, my childhood in Malawi. Ask me what languages are spoken, how to say ‘Good morning’ in Chichewa and ‘I love you’ in Kiswahili. Ask me about Tanzanian music and what *ncima* tastes best with. I will tell you about Mount Mulanje and Kilimanjaro, describe the texture of the sand on the shores of Lake Malawi compared to those of the Indian Ocean. I can tell you about my school, my friends, what I plan to do with the education I was given. I have stories, anecdotes, and memories I love to share. But do not ask me what Africa has taught me. Africa does not exist to be a fable, to illuminate the flaws of Western society and teach us how to be more benevolent beings. Africa is not other, it just *is*. This, I believe, is the most valuable story I have taken from my years abroad. The oceans are powerful boundaries, but our egos, our belief that unknown people are fundamentally *different* from us – these are stronger, yet so needless.