

NaTivia Esson

January 8, 2019

Dear Nayyirah Waheed,

Salt. reassured all my doubts about my identity and let me know that I am not the only black girl that feels such a way about issues relating to culture, race, gender, and sexuality. In many instances, you have stolen the words directly from my mouth and allowed so many people to be enlightened on these social justice issues through your platform. I thank you for doing such a courageous act in a time when still so many black women are minimized, especially in literature. In particular, your poem “African-American II” from Salt. resonated with me. I, too struggled with never truly knowing my cultural identity. I struggle with it now.

I attend a school with students of diverse backgrounds, and many of my peers are immigrants or have parents who immigrated to America. I constantly find myself comparing myself to them and becoming ever so envious of their sense of belonging to their own cultures. And then I came across your poem, and the issue at hand became history. “I lost a whole continent,” the words in the book mumble. They can pinpoint their motherland so easily on a map. Ancestry.com can only tell me what is obvious: I’m black and I was stolen from somewhere in West Africa between the years 1619 and 1860. Their history can be easily told from word of mouth, generation by generation, as did mine up until that pivotal point of slavery. I have to fill in the rest with an American History textbook.

They are pho, curry, biryani, tamales, chilaquiles, dumplings, and bento boxes. I am fried chicken, collard greens, and sweet potatoes. I am Popeye’s and Jack Pirtle’s. “Unlike all other hyphenated Americans, my hyphen is made of blood. Feces. Bone,” your words harshened,

beginning to move me. Their hyphens come from opportunities, pride, and naturalization. Mine is forced; it comes from trafficking, rape, and dehumanization.

“When Africa says hello, my mouth is a heartbreak. Because I have nothing in my tongue to answer her,” your words exposed my comparatively pathetic reality. They are Spanish, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, and Japanese. I am English, and English only. I can’t even venerate my ancestors in their language. I don’t even know what that language is. “I do not know how to say hello to my mother,” your words sighed, and finally became one with me. They know how to say hello to their mother. I am left a ward of the state.

My mother cannot feed her children; my mother is constantly infantilized by tear-jerking commercials playing in first-world countries pleading an unassuming, privileged person to help the poor, starving, African children for just “pennies a day”. That person may truly believe that all African people live in huts and drink murky water. Who knows where that money even goes to? My mother was invaded, and is still being invaded, by imperialist nations. My mother suffers from internal conflicts and wars that constantly destroy her from the inside out. My mother was split into nonsensically placed pieces, rendering her unrecognizable to her own children. My mother was exploited—for the whole world knew she had a beautiful radiance about her, and a heart of gold.

“African-American II” has rekindled a fire in me in such a way that I mourn the death of my original culture again and again. I feel as if this sense of belonging to Africa is a distant reality. To them, I may seem watered down. If I were to tour Africa today, I might seem as strange and foreign as the men on the slave ships. If I were to tour Africa today, I would belong just as much as I do here.

Nayyirah Waheed, I now see that neither of us have fully recovered from the home invasion. Neither of us know how to say hello to our mother, and that's okay.

Thank you,

NaTivia Esson