

The Year of Return: Daughter of Africa

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Abstract

The *Year of Return* (2019) marks 400 years since the first ship left the West Coast of Africa with stolen people and forcibly brought them to Jamestown, Virginia, and enslaved them. Many Black and African Americans returned home to Mother Africa that year to experience cultural tourism. I was fortunate to be amongst them. My autoethnographic, detailed sensory experience is the story of my first trip to a local outdoor market in Africa. This was my first trip to the continent of Africa, and it was absolutely life-changing for me. Many of my feelings of displacement translate to America, especially during the 2020 election year.

Keywords: African American, identity, culture, ethnicity

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Medase is Twi, a variant of Akan, a widely spoken language in Ghana for "thank you." These words form in my mouth like the fun of blowing a bubble. They are sweet and light to my tongue. The summer sun is high. It beams down on my back, but my head is held too high to notice. Sweat streams from the nape of my neck down my back as I strut through the market with confidence, avoiding murky puddles and broken stones. My feet move to an invisible rhythm as I keep up with the fast pace of the flow of people. *I'm home*. Vibrant colors catch my eye at every turn. Fabrics and bags hang from makeshift stalls with vendors' wide-tooth smiles, motioning for me to take a closer look. A playful smile spreads to the corners of my mouth as I walk by, mouthing, *Medase!* I turn sharply to the left, and my nose starts to tingle. The aroma of red peppers and piles of various spices piled like sandcastles entice my tastebuds. The flavors are thick in the air.

Oscar, my Ghanaian tour guide's small, round head, tilts to the right, signaling to me that we are about to make another sharp turn. The market is far too busy to speak. As far as my four eyes can see, there is a sea of beautiful, impeccably dressed Black people of all ages. *I belong here*. The heat from my body causes my glasses to fog up at the bottom of the rose gold frames. My feet continue to follow the rhythm of the drum in my heart.

A gorgeous woman in a two-piece dress comes inches away from my face with a huge, round, chestnut-colored basket on her head. Her posture stays perfect as she exchanges cedi with a happy customer. Oscar bends his back like the matrix to avoid being slapped by whatever is in her basket. It has an enormous translucent tail. My feet instinctively hop on the sidewalk, allowing me a closer look into her

basket. *This is my place*. It is filled with giant, body-pillow-sized white fish. *Shit*, I laugh to myself, thanking my feet for keeping up with the rhythm. I hop down off the sidewalk and continue on the broken path preparing to make a right ready for the next sensory adventure that awaits.

OH, GOD. HELP ME. The rhythm is gone. My feet are doing an awkward shuffle as my eyes try to avoid contact with everything to my immediate everywhere. *I've lost my sense of direction*. Raw, bloody meat hangs from ceilings and spills out of baskets on the ground with hooves, claws, and scales. Nausea comes over me like a wave from the smell of exposed flesh. A violent lurch immerses from my stomach. My feet continue to move slower in fear of stepping on anything that once lived but is now showcased in the hot sun, uncovered, and surrounded by flies. *I've lost my rhythm, fuck*. I double over quickly as my stomach tries to purge everything that is inside of me. *It's empty. I haven't eaten*. My eyes close briefly while my dripping arms stay as humanly close as possible to my body to avoid touching the meats. The air is thick with the scent of fresh blood. *I can't feel the rhythm*. Everything I'm experiencing is painfully foreign.

My lips slightly part to allow air in and out as we quickly make another sharp right out to the market's main street. Shame follows my every step as I keep my chin down to keep anyone from noticing how much of a misfit I am. A mother sits on the sidewalk with a purple umbrella shading a sleeping child as a hungry one hangs from her round left breast. Her eyes show no signs of being an outsider like me.

We cross the busy street, brushing past bumpers of bright red and cobalt blue cars.

My eyes stay glued to the road to avoid any eye contact with people arriving to shop at *their* usual market. The white van with our driver, Prince, is parked in an easily accessible spot. Oscar politely opens the door for us to enter. Prince looks at us through the rear-view mirror. My hands wrap around the back of the seats as I pull myself into the middle row. I sit quietly by the window, staring down at my wringing hands, wishing that the guilt would squeeze out of them and onto the floor. I imagine a starry jumble of red, white, and blue seeping from my pores. I'm American, and I *hate* it.

*I am a complete fraud. How could I be in the Motherland and not be able to stomach the market? What kind of daughter am I? African **American**, my brain taunts me with this answer as I try to push down feeling like an unwanted stepchild of a mother I've waited my entire life to meet. This is unfair. I should know Twi fluently. That market should be my market. My eyes close, and I remember the market from which I am a successor.*

My ancestors were sold at the slave market. They worked on the Stroud Plantation in Calvert, Texas. Calvert is 57 miles from Waco, Texas, where my grandparents settled and started their family. Many of my relatives still reside in Calvert and Waco, Texas, to this day. *The country.* Carolyn Lewis, my paternal grandmother, had deep scars on her hands from where she picked cotton as a young girl. In the god-forsaken south, cotton is the popular décor trend. Thanks to two friendly buzzards that claimed Waco as their roadkill, better known as the Gaines, cotton can be found mocking me on wreaths and displayed proudly in vases at every store with home decor. *Fuck fixer-upper.*

Air fills my lungs as I breathe it in

through my nose and out through my mouth. I remind myself that *I am here in Ghana. I made it home to Mama Africa. It is still my Motherland. I am **not** a forgotten daughter, maybe displaced but not unknown.*