

Accentity (Accent Identity)

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I belong to an ever-growing community of West Africans in diaspora, more specifically Nigerians in America. Immigrating to another country is never an easy task. To leave centuries of history and connection behind is an ask that can only be justified by the issue that merits such displacement, of which there are many. Be it escaping from traditional customs that endanger the lives of your family or winning the visa lottery, a golden-ticket opportunity to rewrite the sins of the past and start life anew. Or for the plain desire to create a better life for your children in an environment away from your birthplace which slowly seems to be collapsing in on itself. It was rough enough when they were children, but they never imagined that it would become much worse. Regardless of any given reason, we make the journey to a new continent, a new world.

We are everywhere. We go to the same grocery stores, get excited for the latest movie releases, and eat the same burgers found in the seemingly endless rows of restaurants. We vote in the same elections, actively advocate for change in American society and face the same universal struggles. Despite these shared similarities, we couldn't be more different from American culture if we tried. We shop at the only few African markets around, dress up in our traditional clothing every Sunday for an inarguably African church service, pray for change in our dishonest Nigerian government, and hope our families in the motherland stay safe from random acts of violence. We attend the same schools, have similar teachers and learn the same subjects. But wherever we go, our accents follow us as a reminder of what we left behind.

Middle school, as bad as it was already, only got worse if you spoke with a different accent. As if the hundreds of consciously and unconsciously anxious and self-negligent tweens did not have enough ammunition to fuel their bursts of mockery and displays of insecurity, now they had another tool, one that could be launched anytime you so much as opened your mouth to express why you did not deserve to be treated this horribly. Even worse are your attempts to defend another classmate getting bullied only for the focus of ridicule to be shifted to you, them mouthing your words, stretching their faces to accentuate its hilariousness, and puckering their lips in that strange way they did when mimicking African accents. Afraid of it happening again, from now on you would look the other way anytime you saw a peer suffering the same fate you try so hard to shield yourself from.

Perhaps you develop a second accent, one for home and another for everywhere else, in hopes of better successfully assimilating with the people who have caused you great torment. You pray that they do not recognize your African heritage and instead ignorantly embrace you as "one of their own." You wonder if they smell the jollof rice you had for lunch or the amala you ate for dinner yesterday in your breath. You even begin to look down on your other African

classmates who were not as quick to jump ship, who, unlike you despite all the bullying and harsh critics, they'd still rather stay true to their roots than to be indoctrinated to the shallow depths of a half-baked life. Although this strategy may work for a time, you begin to feel ever more alienated because (a.) everyone knows you're African, and (b.) everyone notices how hard you try to hide it. You never feel at home with any group because you're never sure when to let your guard down.

It's a balancing act, being an immigrant. You get the best and worst of both worlds. The desire to be so firmly planted in one group lingers still, and you seek out any avenue of connection and understanding. Over time though you begin to accept your accent, love it even. Every slip of the accent into a more traditional one outside of home now represents a reconnection to a shared heritage. Sundays are the days you feel most comfortable; the medley of tradition combined with youthful empathy, for a moment, drowns out the pain from the past week and beyond. Then you wake up the next day at six o'clock in the morning to replay the reality of being a foreigner in another country.