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## *Shards from a Broken Glass*



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I'd never thought of myself as having any sort of racial awareness. My interactions with race were flares that burned for a second before I was thrust back into my own dark reality. The truth is, growing up as an average Jamaican there were many more pressing issues to worry about. As a child I worried about when I would see my mother who had left me in the country to live with relatives while she had gone to the city in search of a better life. In high school I worried about being safe. I remember when one high school had to change the colour of their uniform because a student was killed during elections; she had on the "colour" of one of the political parties. There were the times on the bus to or from school when someone would rob the passengers at gun or knifepoint. In university, my student loan was the main concern. I applied like everyone else each year and while I got approved the first year, the second year I was turned down. According to the Student Loan Bureau's calculations I was not poor enough even though I could barely afford to get to school and to eat every day. I had to go back to their office and literally beg for a loan. Regardless of what the calculations had said, if I could not get a loan I could not continue my studies. That was my identity: a poor, constantly afraid individual who wanted to be the first in her family to graduate from university and hopefully get a decent job. I was not unique; this was the reality for me and for most of my friends. I never had time to really think about being black, that was, not until I found myself in a country where being black seemed to be the only thing I was.

I wish I could share an inspiring story of how I ended up teaching English in Japan, but the truth is I don't even remember why I came here. When I was in university I stumbled upon Japanese. I was already studying Spanish and French and out of sheer curiosity, I noticed that our department offered

Japanese as well. While my friends went off to pursue other interests I ended up in a class of about eight students with a teacher from Japan and a textbook filled with alien characters. Most of the foreigners I've met in Japan talk about how their love for manga or other aspects of the culture brought them here. I was oblivious. The only cultural exposure I had of Japan comprised a mini series called *Oshin* which I realised after coming here was not that popular at all. I had no knowledge of sushi and remember asking my teacher once, what was the deal with eating raw fish? Do you just come home, don't feel like cooking and decide to eat the thing raw instead? She kindly explained what the deal was, but in her mind she probably found my question obnoxious. My decisions soon placed me in a situation where I too would be answering my share of obnoxious questions. I kept studying Japanese for a year and a half and learned about a programme run by the Japanese government that sent university graduates to Japan to teach English. I applied and got accepted, but when I told my family and friends, most of them called me crazy. It was too far, the culture was too different, what would I eat! Somehow I was not concerned at all; I packed my bags, said goodbye to my family, friends and my country, and before I knew it I was sitting on the floor in a small apartment in Japan shaking my head in disbelief.

What did I know about being black? In high school I did Caribbean history, learned about the slave trade and like many of my friends, developed some shallow resentment for white people, though not white Jamaican people because they were not really "white." I was vaguely aware when I was a child that if you wanted to work in a bank, being brown was best. The first time I heard a sustained conversation about Jamaicans' negative attitude toward skin colour was in 1992, when Buju Banton came out with his song "Love Me Browning", in which he talked about his love for girls with light skin. In fact the uproar was so loud, Buju Banton had to follow up the browning song with "Love Black Woman". I know my hair had been straightened when I was a child because it was easier to manage and looked better than the natural kinky hair, and in university when I decided to shave my head and grow my hair naturally there were many cries of disapproval from friends and family members. My friends and I discussed the women we would see downtown who used cake soap (washing soap) to bleach their faces, and while we recognized that they did this because they wanted lighter complexions, there was no depth to our discussions. We mostly laughed at them, called them uneducated and rolled our eyes. I was black but I hadn't really noticed. I soon found out that being black was not an identity I had constructed for myself, but rather one which was thrust upon me by different people in accordance with their own definitions; definitions which I felt stripped me of my right to construct my own identity and imposed a label that I was somehow supposed to adhere to.

During my first few years in Japan, I taught at high schools and at the beginning of each term, I would introduce myself to the students. I would tell them that I was from Jamaica and ask them if they knew where Jamaica was. Overwhelmingly the answer was Africa. I had never really thought of myself as African, even though most of my ancestors were from Africa. I was Jamaican, whatever that meant, but these students took one look at my skin and my hair and placed me firmly on the African continent. At first I wasn't really bothered by this. When I tell people in Jamaica that I live in Japan, many assume China, and if I correct them, they often say "same difference". This is how we as human beings tend to make sense of the world by categorizing information. In the years before coming to Japan there had been a growing acceptance of "blackness" in Jamaica. We had kinky hair, we had dark skin, so what? Bob Marley had it right all along; we were the children of Africa. Therefore each time my students situated Jamaica in Africa, I would point to Jamaica on the map of the world

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to show them where Jamaica was, but sure, I was African too, even though several generations and a violent uprooting separated me from Africa. However, as I became more aware of the narrative many people in Japan had about Africa, I became determined to distinguish my blackness from that of "real" Africans. The problem was, Africa was seen as a dark place. Africans were hungry, sick with all kinds of diseases and were barely surviving. Africa was not made up of different countries, with different peoples and languages, but was one massive land of pain and suffering. Suddenly I didn't feel comfortable being viewed as African. I was embarrassed at the image of Africa and I didn't want to be associated with it at all. In fact, I stopped asking my students where they thought Jamaica was. I would immediately show them on the map and I would be quick to emphasise how close Jamaica was to the United States, as if our geographical proximity indicated a more enlightened culture as well. The tragic rape and murder of my ancestors, figuratively and literally, were diluted to explain my less kinky hair, lighter skin and the fact that I speak English. See, I am not like them at all! Deep inside I felt ashamed and confused, but mostly ashamed because the truth was, most of the people I had met from African countries in Japan accepted me as one of their own.

The black community in Japan is very small. Most of the foreigners who work in Japan are English teachers and most of them are hired from countries where English is "assumed" to be the native language, which means there are just a handful of teachers from African countries. After all, Africans don't speak English! The majority of black teachers are from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Jamaica, and we are very few in number. This means that, at least where I live, when one black person sees another, we almost always acknowledge and sometimes even approach the person to find out more about them. We crave that sense of community we sometimes feel we can only get from people who look like us or people who have had the same experiences as we have. We can share stories about how children cry when they see us because they think we are scary, how people ask if our skin is made from chocolate or how people assume that we are gospel singers. In my time here, I have met people from Ghana, the Ivory Coast, the Gambia, Nigeria and a host of other African countries. Immediately I would become their sister because they look at my skin and accept me as one of them, regardless of my nationality. Initially in my superiority, I had considered myself lucky not to be African; yet I envied them. I envied the languages they spoke, their culture which they could trace back to thousands of years and their beautiful traditional dress. Our white calico top and plaid skirt paled in comparison to the vibrant and beautifully complex traditional costumes my African sisters would wear from time to time. I envied their pride at being African. And my hypocrisy was slowly suffocating me. I would take comfort from them but like Judas, deny that I was one of them. The truth was, even though I knew there were many different narratives of Africa, I felt sorry for them. I too was exposed to mostly the pain and suffering of people on the continent. Most of the television programmes I had watched were about wars, famine, or the beautiful animals on the safari. There were not as many programmes about normal, everyday life. Who wants to see that? Seeing the suffering of our African sisters and brothers made us pity them and even though many of us were ashamed to articulate this, it made many of us feel that we were lucky to have gotten off the continent. Imagine my surprise when, while in England, I met a young man from Ghana, who expressed how sorry he felt for me because my ancestors were slaves and I had lost my culture. This came as such a shock because while I was already beginning to feel this loss, I had never imagined that people whom I pitied also pitied me. I was their sister, but their poor estranged little sister who had been away from the family for so long, she was barely recognizable; black on the outside but something else entirely on the inside, Tarzan left in the jungle for too long. All my feelings of superiority deflated; how inferior I felt! In my effort to distinguish myself from that particular label,

African, I had failed to realize that those who inhabited that label had only lent it to me out of pity. Regardless of how much the intellectuals and Rastafarians in Jamaica were talking about going back to Africa, our ambivalence toward each other made me feel that Africa was not mine and Africa didn't really want me.

"I hope you don't find this question strange, but do you prefer to be called Black or African-American?" This was the question I would get mostly from my white friends who were trying very hard to be politically correct. I would tell them to call me Jamaican, and if that didn't work, call me Black; African-American did not describe me. While I was finding it more and more difficult to explain who I was, I had become very good at explaining who I was not. Essentially I was not American so that part was easy to explain, but why was I so determined to extricate myself from "African-American" as well? I didn't think I was superior or inferior to them, but that label was a bit heavy and much too fragile to bear. I didn't quite understand the cautiousness with which my white friends spoke, or the guilt they seemed to exhibit whenever the topic of race came up. After spending time with some of my African-American friends, I got a better sense of those attitudes. Most of my African-American friends opened my eyes to race in a way I had never really envisioned before. I had one friend in particular who was so obsessed with race he saw it everywhere. In the first few years of living in Japan, we had many experiences where we would sit on a train next to a native and immediately this person would get up and move to another train car. We didn't know why they did, but my friend would attribute this to them being racist, and he would blindly ignore the fact that this happened to our white friends as well. Whenever there was a sign that said "No Foreigners" he would read that sign as "No Blacks". Whenever there was any critique levelled against him, he would automatically assume that he was being criticised because of the colour of his skin. White people were not to be trusted, and our white friend from Argentina was not really white because his parents were Spanish and Spain was invaded by the Moors, therefore there was some black blood in him somewhere. Listening to him was exhausting, and while his views were extreme, many African-American friends and acquaintances exhibited this attitude to some extent.

In Jamaica we didn't have black or white, we had shades. We had a very small white population, and I had never thought of those persons as white. They were just Jamaican. I had never experienced being stopped or searched by police officers because I was black. Sure, in Jamaica the police stopped and searched individuals based on a stereotype; it was class, not race. Being poor is a crime, but being black is not. No one had ever called me nigger or had ever run away from me because they were afraid I would hurt them. Jamaica has its own history of racial tensions but these were stories I had read in history books and for the most part were not persistent in contemporary society unlike the United States. Many of my African-American friends had experienced some form of racism and it had shaped their identity. I listened and empathized with them but I was never able to arouse the level of anger they seemed to exhibit when talking about race. If anything, they made me overly paranoid. After spending time listening to them, whenever I travelled to the United States I would be vigilant of my surroundings. I would wonder if the white people smiling at me were in fact harbouring some deep resentment toward me based on the colour of my skin. I would take extra care to look "normal" when walking past police officers in New York. I would make sure that when I spoke, I used perfect English so I would not be mistaken for the kind of person they thought was uneducated. Once while shopping in a GAP store in New York, a white woman came up to me and asked me if I had her size in the pair of jeans she had in her hands. I politely answered that I didn't work there and she apologized. I was sure she assumed I worked there because I was black, poor and this was the only

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job I could get. This was a part of me that I did not recognize. Where had all this come from? I hated myself for harbouring these irrational feelings of resentment toward people I didn't even know. No, I couldn't be African-American, at least not in the way it was presented to me by the people I knew. I appreciated how aware I had become of the problems of race, but I didn't want to be consumed by a hatred I didn't fully understand.

Twelve years from where this discussion began, here I stand more uncertain than before, stripped bare of others' definitions of my blackness. Why not just be Jamaican? After all, that was what I was regardless of skin colour, but that didn't seem to fit either, at least with the perceptions others had of Jamaica, and the perception Jamaica had of me. One of the first questions I was asked by a Japanese colleague when I got here was whether or not I could run really fast. Unfortunately I couldn't. She seemed disappointed. How had they managed to get the one Jamaican who couldn't run fast? Many of the foreigners I have met here have told me how lucky I was to have been born in Jamaica. Some of the best weed they have smoked was from there. Oh, good for you, I don't smoke weed, I would reply. You are joking, right, they would say. What a waste! At a conference in Taiwan a few years ago, after spending about ten minutes talking with a female lecturer from the United States, she commented on how good and how easy to understand my English was. She had had a few students from Jamaica and according to her, she was barely able to understand them. Well, who cared what people outside of Jamaica thought? My identity was not based on their copy-paste stereotype. Jamaica was mine, the one place I could easily slip into without feeling like an outsider, where discussions about the meaning of blackness were mostly left up to academics expressing and refuting their views at conferences over cake and tea. Apparently this is not so simple either. I may have been born Jamaican but having lived outside of Jamaica for many years somehow made me less Jamaican. Whenever I went home I was called "foreigner." In their eyes, since I had not lived there for such a long time, and had not shared the same experiences, I was barely Jamaican. Friends mocked my patois. It sounded too English, plus nobody used those words anymore! I didn't know the most current dancehall songs and I definitely didn't know which dance was popular. I could complain about politicians like everyone else, but I wasn't directly affected by the political actions of the government. Sure I was Jamaican, but not "Jamaican Jamaican" anymore. I remember meeting a friend in Japan who had told me she was Jamaican, only to find out that her parents were Jamaican while she was born in Canada. At that time I had politely informed her that being Jamaican was not just an identity you assumed when it was convenient, it was an experience you shared with the people on the rock. How many of those experiences do I truly share when I go home for ten days every two years?

If you had asked me who I was before I left Jamaica, I would have told you that I was Jamaican, with ancestors primarily from Africa. If you ask me who I am right now, I will tell you that I am not sure. I mostly think that I am a black Jamaican woman, a fluid identity if you will, sometimes in that order and other times with those adjectives emphasized/deemphasized when I am unable to inhabit all three equally. Ask me this question again in ten years and while I can't tell you what my answer will be, I can tell you for sure that it will mostly certainly have changed. In the meantime, I will do my best to keep my fractured identity whole.