

# Deconstructing One's Paper Identity

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## Passport

"You must go." With that I became a deportee at the age of 22.

Working with Project Plus One, a group dedicated to implementing sustainable health care and development programs in Timor-Leste, made it imperative for me to actually make a trip to the beautiful island country. Therefore, I began planning the trip, and these preparations included the application for a fellowship that could sponsor me to further Project Plus One's mission in Timor-Leste and in particular at the Bairo Pite Clinic. When I was awarded the Sorensen Fellowship, I was ecstatic at how wonderfully the Fellowship goals aligned with my own. My plan had been to go to Bairo Pite Clinic and work to create a system that could be used to ensure that disabled individuals receive the treatment they require without the discrimination attached to being disabled.

I got my ticket and travel papers in order before I set off. Having travelled to other countries, I knew how imperative it was to have the correct travel documentation. Therefore, I made a series of phone calls after my online visa applications, for reassurances from the various consulates whose countries I would be passing through on the way to Timor-Leste, including Singapore and Indonesia. What I had forgotten to check at the door was my innocence.

My trip to Timor-Leste was plagued by a couple of small but complicated hitches from the outset. For instance, I had to have my departure postponed two days, as my airline could not see my flight plan from Indonesia to Timor-Leste since it had been booked with another airline. They gave me a couple of days to find proof of that connecting flight, which I did. When I went back to the airport, the staff hassled me a little bit by asking for additional supporting documents, such as sponsorship documents, although the consulate employees I had spoken with assured me this was not required. I showed the airline staff my Sorensen internship overview as well as my mother's bank statements, which they analyzed closely before reluctantly checking me through to Amsterdam.

I should have realized that this was a glaring warning sign about my future trip. At that point, I probably should have

listened to the inner turmoil in my heart. Everything should have gone a whole lot more smoothly but I was determined and, even more so, I was stubborn. So I ignored my misgivings. I got to Amsterdam and waited out my long 14 hour layover before boarding my flight to Singapore. During my flight, I checked in with the crew to verify the legitimacy of my travel papers as I wanted to avoid any more hitches. I was cleared to continue my journey. By this time I was about halfway to Timor-Leste. I was so close, I could taste it. There was no turning back. I landed in Singapore and had hardly been there 40 minutes when I was yet again flight-bound to Indonesia.

On the plane I met a very nice French man and a young Timorese girl who both indulged me as I practiced French and Tetun on them. I was so thrilled. I had already made a Timorese friend and we were making plans for Bali and Dili and the hotel. She was nice. We got to immigration and I had all my papers ready. I walked up to the counter where a pleasant-looking man stood. His one striking feature was an oversized big front tooth that seemed to take over his smile. I handed over my documents. He looked down at my papers then back at me. (To this day I wonder whether I should have chosen to wear a different T-shirt since the one I had on read "I am Proudly Kenyan." I guess I will never know.) Anyway, his smile turned into a frown as he told me my visa and



passport were “no good.” My heart began to sink but I kept a smile on my face as I probed him to tell me what “no good” meant. He silenced me and ushered me into a small room off to the side of the counters. Emblazoned in big letters was the sentence that put the fear of God into me. The sentence was, “The penalty for drug traffickers is death.”

While it may seem a bit of a leap to automatically connect my being African to being a suspected drug trafficker, I thought it was pretty logical. According to the latest World Drug Report (2013), the recent trend is for African countries to act as a valuable transit point for drugs such as heroin and cocaine coming into Asian countries. In fact, Indonesia has reported increased trafficking of methamphetamine by African groups.<sup>1</sup> Though I couldn't be sure why they were singling me out, my fear was based on these reports, and on the stereotypes of Africans I'd read about in Asian countries. In such reports African countries are sometimes grouped as a unit without reference to the individual nations. Here I was in this foreign airport, having my documents scrutinized by a foreign authority, paralyzed by the fear that he might extend the transgressions of some Africans to all of us. My identity

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to the Indonesian authority was “African.” Could he imagine that an African would be traveling to an Asian country on a service trip? Weren't service trips made by Africans a preposterous notion, seeing that our continent was known as the Dark Continent, even among other poor and developing nations? So even if I was never told what “no good” meant, I had a feeling.

I sat in that airport office as everyone around me moved in and out, totally ignoring me. All the while I wondered who was currently holding my passport, as it seemed to be changing hands pretty quickly – something I was silently observing but trying not to panic over. Finally, after a tense 20 minutes, a man walked to me and handed me back my passport along with a flight itinerary and luggage tags. He told me, “You must go.”

I was escorted from that room like a criminal. All airport staff and security gawked at me, probably under the delusion that I was some drug trafficker who had just been caught. Airport personnel with high clearance were able to stop me to go over my documents and hear the story about this young African deportee firsthand, as the initial toothy man was among those in my escort, before smiling and turning away. I remained silent as waves of humiliation flowed over me. A few paces behind me was a young airport officer who had been monitoring the progress of my situation. He kept eyeing me and telling me he could help me, but the way his eyes kept running over my body made me sure that his was not the kind of help I needed. So I kept declining his offers. He didn't let up. I felt nauseous, even though there was nothing he could do to me without getting past the three beefy security guards who were herding me through the airport along with two disgruntled flight attendants. All of us were involved in delaying the last flight

leaving the airport for Singapore so that I, the deportee, could be on that plane. Fifteen minutes later I was at the terminal. Somewhere during the quick walk through the airport my bags had been brought and loaded onto the plane. I got on board and the minute I sat down in a broken seat in the last row in economy, the pilot announced they were cleared for takeoff. Everyone on board was able to tie the delay to me and many people in the cabin glared at me. But who could blame them really?

I was in Indonesia for a total of 40 minutes. My plan to intern at the Bairo Pite Clinic in Timor-Leste had disappeared.

This experience made me realize that it is easy for a person's identity to be reduced to what is written on a piece of paper. It's funny how our passports and birth certificates can determine the course of our lives. I never got an explanation for why I was denied entry into Indonesia, but I could only surmise that it was due to the fact that I was African. It took me a long time to actually accept what happened – not just the deportation process, but also the mere fact that my Kenyan passport may have linked me to drug traffickers and deemed me unworthy of access to a country. The Kenyan emblem made me a risk that the Indonesians were unwilling to take. To the rest of the world, I was Kenyan and from that they could draw whatever assumptions they wanted as to my identity, which emphasized my outsider status.

It is true I am Kenyan and proudly so, but that is only a part of who I am. In that Indonesian airport I was never given the chance to show the other aspects of my identity. That is what plagued me even months after. My identity had been reduced to what was on a piece of paper.



## Foreign Local

“Where are you from?”

“Africa.”

“Well you are weird and you talk different and your name sounds funny.”

This was definitely not an encouraging start to my early childhood in St. Louis, Missouri, where I spent the better part of my formative years learning two separate cultures: the house culture where we spoke my native tongue, Kikuyu and the national culture, the American one. The rest of my childhood was spent in Kenya, my country and my “real home.” When I look back, I wonder whether my life would have been different had I been raised in Kenya like my cousins and the rest of my family. But in the end, the experience of living in two different countries has helped shape the person I am today. Sadly, the confusion that comes with this experience is I cannot consider myself either fully Kenyan or fully American. By Kenyan law I could not, at the time, hold dual citizenship so I knew I could never officially be both. But I have also learned that the deficit goes deeper than my citizenship. It has led me to a creative definition of myself as a “foreign local.”

The term “foreign local” was coined by a couple of my Kenyan friends who, like me, found it difficult to reintegrate into society due to our exposure to other cultures that had altered our lifestyles and our perceptions. This exposure put us in a class that made associating with people from different income brackets in Kenya very difficult. We were not rich in the conventional sense, just rich in experiences and knowledge. My opportunity to travel made me believe I had seen it all. However, this may also have been simply my overconfidence and my taking a lot of things for granted.

All I know is by the time I returned to Kenya after the grueling 64 hour trip from Indonesia, I had forgotten all about my self-forged identity as a foreign local. What I needed was empathy from my fellow Kenyans after the traumatizing and humiliating experience of deportation. Instead, what I received was indifference. That made the transition home even more difficult.

Over the course of my life, I have grappled with the question “who am I?” Not because it seemed like a question to lose sleep over but because I have been genuinely confused. I have faced rejection after rejection but the most painful one has been from my own people. Other Kenyans have rejected me for not being “Kenyan enough.” It was as though there was an invisible scale I was standing on that tipped against me. I never knew there was a standard measure of “Kenyness,” but be that as it may, I fell into the “not enough” category.


This is why, upon my return from Indonesia, I had so much trouble securing a replacement internship – I was once again seen as a foreign local. While there were many opportunities for people such as myself who had studied outside Kenya, these were not at the grass-roots level where I wanted to work. People had no time for me, as they considered me an elite educational snob for choosing to go to university study abroad. One look at my resume, and I was labeled a spoiled rich brat with possibly no “real” skills, as that is the stereotype of many Kenyans who have studied abroad. What the potential internship supervisors failed to do was make the distinction between me, a Kenyan who received the opportunity to study abroad, and the children of powerful individuals in Kenya, especially politicians, who saw it as the only option for their children. They disregarded my possible merits and judged me off a piece of paper,

just as the Indonesian airport authorities had done with my passport. Once again, my identity had been reduced to what was written on a single paper, this time my resume. Once again my “paper identity” had worked against me. This paper identity was getting ridiculous.

In my search for a new internship site, I sent out mass feeler emails requesting a volunteer opportunity in Kenya or any other African nation. I hit every NGO I could find. Making appointments, showing up at offices, and dropping my resume and cover letter everywhere I could. Nothing turned up. It is sad to admit this, but it is much easier to find an opportunity in Kenya while *outside* of Kenya, because Kenyans are mighty competitive. If site supervisors or human resource managers believed some random foreign local kid was trying to steal a job from “real locals,” they thwarted any efforts. I was frustrated and disappointed. Here I was, wanting to work for free and even pay them a stipend to accept me, wanting to be mentored and wanting to learn from others, but no one was giving me the time of day. All I could do for the first month back in Kenya was want.

This dismissal by my fellow Kenyans was nearly as painful as the rejection I experienced in Indonesia. I became a walking contradiction. I was a Kenyan national rejected for being foreign while in Asia, but I was similarly rejected for being foreign among other Kenyan nationals.

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Was I making a real impact on their lives? I felt there was a disproportionate gain between the members of these groups and myself – that is, I gained much more from them in terms of knowledge and exposure than they did from me. I was, after all, basically an outsider with just a couple of insider insights. I could not speak for a community that lived so differently from me, despite all of us being fellow Kenyans.

In the end and perhaps ironically, I managed to secure an internship with an organization run by an American: Kenya Social Ventures (KSV). The leaders of KSV saw my value as someone with local knowledge of Kenya and Kenyans, and perhaps with more insight into the inner workings of Nairobi slums. This was only partially accurate. I do understand Kenyan customs and speak Swahili, so I had more insider knowledge than some at KSV. But as a foreign local, I was still an outsider to slum dwellers, despite having done some previous work with this demographic.

### Kenya Social Ventures

Kenya Social Ventures is a new, multifaceted organization that seeks to have a lasting impact on the lives of underprivileged Kenyans through grass roots efforts. Some of the projects the

organization has undertaken include strength and training programs with secondary schools, social business development in the slums, HIV/AIDS and cervical cancer awareness, long term rainwater harvesting in rural villages, and agricultural logistics among farming groups.<sup>2</sup> My main internship goal for the summer was to document the stories of the people involved in these local grass roots projects, in order to give KSV content for its advertising materials, to put a “face” on the programs it is supporting, and to open access to an international target market and audience by providing information to build the organization’s website.

While I was with KSV I was attached to two particular projects in Kibera, the largest slum area in Nairobi, and home to 60% of Nairobi’s population.<sup>3</sup> The first project involved a group called Power Women’s Group, comprised of women who were HIV-positive and seeking economic self-empowerment via craft making. The zeal and persistence that these women possessed in the face of stigmas attached to their health status were remarkable. I learned so much about the local informal market, their perspectives on NGOs, and possible solutions to the flaws of health promotion programs currently in the slums.

In the second project I worked with a group called the Victorious Bone Shop, which was an all male group that had come together from different situations to make crafts out of animal bones. They overcame many challenges as they set up their shop and faced setbacks in their production in the form of city council disruptions, looting during post-election violence and competition from other “bone crafters” in the region. (They were one of 15 such small crafting shacks.) Their efforts were truly formidable and the level of organization they achieved without having received formal training was amazing. In fact, they were so successful that they

taught the skills of informal business management and accounting to others for a fee. I was impressed by the amount of innovation happening right now – not just in the slums of Nairobi but also in slums across Kenya, and possibly even in other parts of the African continent.

That being said, aside from documenting the stories of these men and women and providing KSV with content for their website, there was not much else I could do for the members of these two groups. Was I making a real impact on their lives? I felt there was a disproportionate gain between the members of these groups and myself – that is, I gained much more from them in terms of knowledge and exposure than they did from me. I was, after all, basically an outsider with just a couple of insider insights. I could not speak for a community that lived so differently from me, despite all of us being fellow Kenyans. Though my writing for KSV could give them a voice, I feared it might be ineffective. What if my position as a foreign local was actually a disadvantage for them? What if they were rejected merely because they had *me* on their side?

### Kibera

My work in Kibera was not without its challenges. For one, before I began to work I realized just how misinformed I had been about the slum and its residents. Like many other people, I was working with one-sided information. Kibera’s infamy arises from the fact that the individuals living within this community are on the extreme end of the income spectrum. There are 2.5 million people living in Kibera, representing approximately 60% of Nairobi’s population yet occupying only 6% of the city’s land area.<sup>4</sup> There is mass consumption of drugs and cheap, potent, and potentially lethal locally brewed beverages such as *changaa*. The residents deal with insecurity, open sewers, poor



medical facilities, high rates of HIV/AIDS, entrenched poverty and deplorable living situations. Even if you want to broaden your knowledge of life in Kibera, all you come up with is a couple of articles giving reference to the poverty we already know about. You are likely to see pictures of dirty children with tattered clothes, or else be invited to try a “slum tour,” a concept I find utterly degrading, although I am starting to see its benefits in the economic sense. But I get ahead of myself.

Almost everything you find about Kibera online, in papers and so on does little to paint a picture different from the general stereotype of slums. If anything, you are left almost fearful due to the mystery surrounding the area. As an outsider, not knowing what to expect is the scariest feeling in the world. I am no stranger to this fear and anxiety. When I first learned that I would be working there, I tried to recall articles that I had read, or stories and news reports I had heard about Kibera. All that really stood out in my mind was the abject poverty and lack of security.<sup>5</sup>

So, on my first day there, I was a true foreigner, not just because I had never been in Kibera but also because I was holding on to hearsay and articles to form an opinion. Ironically, this is a trait often seen in tourists. It did not help that, although generally accurate, the only pictures available of Kibera capture the abject poverty – the narrow, muddy and littered pathways, the dirty-looking children with tattered clothes, the open sewage and unsanitary living conditions. Though the pictures capture a certain reality, they speak little of the people living that reality. Nonetheless, such pictures painted my subconscious with a desperate image. The physical environment coupled with my outsider status shaped a bias that I only came to realize I possessed when reflecting on my experience after I returned to Brandeis.

## My Kibera

Before working in Kibera I had visited Soweto – one of the largest slums not only in South Africa but also on the African continent. I had also visited Mukuru, a smaller slum in Nairobi. So I figured I wouldn’t be too shocked by Kibera. In fact, I remember being pleasantly surprised on my first day.

I was with the rest of the KSV team. Because we were going in together, we drove as far into Kibera as we could before we got out of the car and continued by foot. I remember preparing my nose for the unpleasant and sometimes foul smells that marked out areas with spilled sewage or pit latrines. Though the smell was there, it was not nearly as pungent as I expected it to be. As we crossed abandoned parking lots and got onto the characteristic littered narrow and muddy pathways between the slums, we found ourselves surrounded by a plethora of half-naked children who were eager to shake our hands. They especially wanted to touch Blake, my supervisor, who was the only *mzungu* (white person) in our small group. We walked and talked with ease. No one seemed too bothered about our presence even if they could see we were all strangers by the way we carried ourselves. I did not feel out of place and there was also strength in numbers. I remember feeling fascinated by the different domesticated animals that roamed freely through the lanes. I wondered how the owners told the chickens apart, as they were all the same without any visible tags. I guess that was the beauty about communal living. What belonged to one person belonged to everyone. Even though there was financial insecurity, as I came to learn during one-on-one interviews, everyone seemed relatively content. They may not have been living a king’s life but they could certainly be deemed happier than many who were.

The busy vegetable market and all the vendors who lined up along the roads gave life to this community. I came to realize that seeing, reading, learning and experiencing the slums are very different things. It’s incredible how falsely the members of this community are depicted. While walking I spotted a particularly juicy avocado so I pleaded with the rest of the team to stop for a little break. We had been walking for about 40 minutes anyway so I proceeded to the vendor with the overturned crate who was selling the beautifully ripe avocado. (I love avocados – they are my weakness). He spotted the company I was in and so quoted me a ridiculous price for the avocado. (50 shillings, about 60 cents). We began to haggle over the price and during our negotiation process I came to learn so much about this vendor. His name was Macharia, he had a wife with four children, and he came from the same place as my mother, Kiambu. We proceeded to play the “do you know...?” game, as almost everyone in Kiambu knows someone or other. I discovered he had heard of my grandparent. Having found a common ground, I guess he realized I was not as foreign as he thought, so he quoted me a much lower price (10 shillings, about 15 cents, which is about the right price for avocados). Though to some this haggling is tedious, I found it enlightening. It really humanized my experience in the slums.

Thoroughly pleased with myself, I bid Macharia adieu and headed back to my group who had been watching me from a little way off with mild amusement. One of the team members was a Kenyan who had grown up in Kibera but had managed to get out through a series of opportunities. He knew how anxious I had felt about going into Kibera for the first time. With a simple pat on the back, he conveyed all his feelings to me. I was accepted into this community. I even *felt* accepted.





We walked past a group of middle-schoolers singing nursery rhymes to toddlers as they awaited their teachers in shanty-like structures. Finally, we found ourselves in front of the dull blue painted shack that housed the Power Women's Group (PWG). Blake introduced me to the women who were there at the time, and explained my role to them as well, for I would be working to capture their voices. After he and Julianne, the head of PWG, walked me through the daily operations of the group, I was allowed to set up my first interview. I was very nervous as my Swahili was a bit rusty and a tad too formal for the kind of conversation I wanted to have during the interview. Flora, one of the other Kenyan interns, noticed my initial hesitation when Blake gave me the go-ahead to start the interviews, so she pulled a chair up next to me and my first interviewee, Atieno. I said a silent thankful prayer to her, pulled out my notebook, poised my pen and began my first interview.

### **Atieno**

Atieno was a brilliant, young, dark-skinned woman who had been at the peak of her adult life when it was deemed "over." While heavily pregnant with her seventh and last child in 2004, she began to feel like all was not right. In fact, she joined a group, similar to KSV, for women who are HIV-positive. After the birth of her child, she went through various spells of illness that left her weak and emaciated. It was then again that she suspected the cause, but she never sought confirmation. At this point, it was better to assume than to hear the truth. It was only when her last-born began to fall deathly ill and battled similar spells that her eyes accepted the truth. With this truth came numbness. Both she and her child were tested and found to be HIV-positive.

Now Atieno knew the truth, but that truth was laden with burdens of reality. Both she and her child required medicine. But with her weak constitution, she could hardly keep up with casual temp work. They were sick. They could see the drugs they needed but could not access them. So close yet so far. The numbness from her helpless situation made her realize one absolute truth. It hurt less if she expected less. Therefore, by the time I was entering her world via KSV, inquiring during her interview about her hobbies, dreams and aspirations – or rather lack thereof – she was ready with a response. With listless eyes, a raspy voice and irregular breathing, she looked me dead in the eye only to ask, "Is there any use in liking food when you have none?" I caught my breath and closed my eyes.

Though heart-rending, her logic was in no way flawed. It was her reality. Atieno's identity, like mine, had been reduced to what was written on a piece of paper, though in her case that piece of paper indicated her HIV test results. These results now "define" her, according to society. But why didn't she seek out a different definition for herself, instead of simply settling into her paper identity? Upon reflection, I realized that Atieno's story and the story of my own tumultuous summer were in some ways parallel. Although others may try to define us through a single story or identity, we do not have to accept this single story or identity for ourselves. This is easier said than done, however.

### **Inside outsider**

Over the rest of my internship I followed a similar routine, which included going to Kibera to capture the stories of the participants in the two KSV projects I was assigned to, then coming home to construct their stories before presenting them to my supervisor.

My days began like this: I would wake up and begin my "preparations" for Kibera. I would take a 15-minute shower with just regular soap so as not to smell different from others. Thinking about it now, I realize just how twisted that sounds, but it is the truth. I was desperately trying to blend in, to be bland, to fit in with this disadvantaged community in the hopes that they wouldn't realize that I was the foreigner among them. After my shower, I would sit on my bed in a contemplative state as I tried to pick out "an appropriate outfit." It had to be something not revealing, as that would attract attention, but also not too conservative, as girls my age in Kibera would not dress in an overly conservative fashion. I needed to be in jeans that were somewhat but not too stylish. I had a pair of bellbottoms that were a dark murky blue that I must have bought when I was about 17 years old. They had sorely outgrown me in that they were looser than I remembered and had well-placed holes. I would always throw on a plain baggy T-shirt that I would then tuck into my jeans. My shirts never mattered, as I wore sweaters daily with a big scarf (regardless of the weather) to hide the feminine features that might attract unwanted eyes. I was, after all, a young woman walking along the paths of Kibera alone. I was voluntarily placing myself in a "suspect" environment (as my mum constantly reminded me), so I needed to be conscious of the dangers facing girls. Rape happened to be one of the things that flitted across my mind whenever I made these daily trips to Kibera. It was why I carried a Swiss army knife and pepper spray. Rape was a very "real reality" and I would be a fool to expect I would be the exception. Better to be paranoid than naive. My shoes were practical, slightly weathered and disposable if need be. No obnoxious jewelry, no sunglasses, no hats, no headphones – nothing. After looking at myself in the mirror I was satisfied. I was ready. But was I? Every morning I asked myself this question, hoping I was.



On one particular day, I went through my regular routine – which on this occasion included a particularly heavy breakfast of freshly blended fruit juice, oatmeal, eggs, toast and tea – before heading out. As I was about to leave the house to walk to my bus stop, my mother, who was leaving for work as well, insisted on giving me a ride. I was not too keen on this, as her car was a bit too flashy (although it pales in comparison to cars in the States), and because I was going to pick up my bus from a somewhat dodgy place. I was fidgety the whole ride to the stop, trying to figure out my strategy for exiting the car without drawing attention to myself. I was glad my anxiety wasn't showing, as my mother was already fussing over why I was going to the slums alone and not with the rest of my team. I gave her the same dull answer that I always did: "I can't wait for everyone's schedule to match up, mum."

At the stop, I hardly waited for her to land her parting kiss on my cheek when I was halfway out the door. Fixing myself up some more, I cautiously glanced around to see if anyone had been watching me. There were a few glances in my direction but nothing too suspicious. I walked slowly toward the sheltered benches at the bus stop and leaned as casually as possible on a pole, greatly resisting the urge to pull out my phone. My iPhone would attract too much attention, so I passed the time humming to myself while counting cars. Finally, my first bus arrived. I got on and quickly scanned the bus with my eyes. It would be important where I would sit, as I did not want to be squeezed in between people at the back. That would make me a prime target for pickpockets and it would be difficult to exit the crowded bus. I chose an aisle seat near the door. A prime seat. I tried to act as casual as possible. I had already put small denomination notes and coins in my pocket so I could avoid having to open

my bag to pull out money. Additionally, I wanted to have change as larger notes attracted attention.

Two buses later, I stood at an intersection that led to either the crowded narrow pathways of Kibera or continued on to the main road. I took a deep breath. I could do this. I walked. Not too fast but not too slowly either. I took short but confident strides. Not too confident, as I was still kind of confused finding my way around Kibera since everything looked the same. All the stores along the road, the products being sold, sights, smells and even the people seemed familiar but I looked out for landmarks. My heart leapt at the sight of the abandoned parking lot that I knew I had to cross. All the while I maintained the façade that I fit right in, although I knew people could tell I wasn't from there, that I was not one of their own.

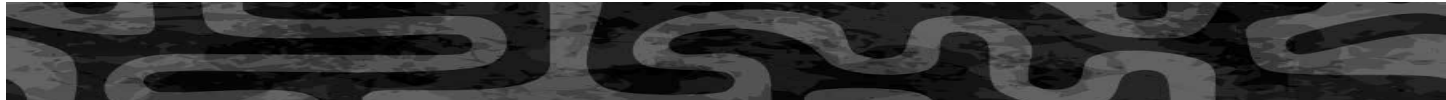
As I walked, I tried to neither make eye contact nor look down, as that would be a sign of either disrespect or weakness in Kenya. I cut through the abandoned parking lot, walking past children and dogs lounging lazily atop the skeleton of what was once a car. The end of the parking lot led to the street where the Power Women's Group (PWG) structure was located. At the sight of the dull blue paint, I quickened my steps. I could see the goal. I was excited. I got to the structure and found the women inside. They were with a group of foreigner tourists who were on a slum tour, or possibly a religious mission trip. They sat huddled on green plastic chairs as Julianne described the mission, vision and core values of PWG. I grabbed



**A day in Kibera.**

one of the plastic chairs and sat down as quietly as possible but not quiet enough to remain unnoticed. Some in the group turned their heads in my direction and with either a faint smile or nod of the head acknowledged my presence. As soon as I sat down, I began to fumble through my bag in search of my notebook and pen so as to make note of what Julianne was saying. I was so caught up in taking notes that I completely failed to realize that I was next to the tour guide who was guiding this group of foreigners. I looked up to see him staring at me with mild amusement. I think he had been watching me the whole time.

He reached out his hand introduced himself as Peter. He told me that he was raised in the slums but had been sponsored to go to high school and college. His story was cut short by the noise of the moving of plastic chairs. The presentation was over and the members of the group were getting ready to take a tour of the shop before leaving. Peter asked one of the PWG women something about the organization in Swahili but I guess she hadn't heard him, so I responded to him instead, in Swahili. I kind of knew the ins and outs of the organization since I had been working there for a while now.



But at the end of the day he was right; I just didn't want to admit it because admitting it would lump me into the same group as those foreigners he was guiding through Kibera.

The only difference is that I would be a foreigner in my own country, and to my own people.

Nothing could have prepared me for his reaction. His head snapped back in my direction and the look of genuine shock and confusion cramped his face. He took my hand again and asked me, "*Wewe umetoka wapi?*" Where are you from? I told him I was from Nairobi. He tilted his head and gave me a quizzical look before saying, "*Nairobi yako na yangu ni tofauti. Wacha nikusalimie tena na mikono.*" Your Nairobi and mine are very different; let me shake your hand once more. I interpreted his remark to mean that the Swahili I spoke was learned and formal, an atypical style for normal conversations. With that, he went back to his group. He left me to stew in my own thoughts.

I was taken aback. I was mad. Mad that he had basically implied that I wasn't really Kenyan and even madder that all the meticulous prepping I had done to look the part was lost on him. His tone, his facial expressions, just everything about the way he spoke to me did not sit well. But at the end of the day he was right; I just didn't want to admit it because admitting it would lump me into the same group as those foreigners he was guiding through Kibera. The only difference is that I would be a foreigner in my own country, and to my own people.

### Conclusion

Every day we use one form of a paper or another to indicate who we are. Whether we present a driver's license, college ID, birth certificate, or resume, we risk being reduced to what is on those documents, losing the multiple dimensions that make up our personhood. Although I have always known that there is more to me than what was written on a piece of paper, my experiences over this summer have made me aware of how easy it is to be reduced to the same one-dimensionality as the piece of paper I handed in to an immigration official or a prospective employer. The challenge is to reject this reductive identity and allow one's multifaceted self to shine through.

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### Notes

1. UNODC, World Drug Report 2013 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.XI.6). Nigeria has been most frequently cited as the origin of methamphetamine, a substance most commonly found in Ecstasy pills.
2. Kenya Social Ventures, Last modified 08 2013. Accessed November 11, 2013. <http://www.kenyasocialventures.com/>.
3. Kibera UK – The Gap Year Company, "Facts and Information." Accessed November 21, 2013. <http://www.kibera.org.uk/Facts.html>.
4. Ibid.
5. Amis, Philip. Squatters or Tenants: The Commercialization of Unauthorized Housing in Nairobi. World Development 12(1), pp. 87-96.