

# What it's like being a (black) North American in Africa

 [BYCHANTAIE ALLICK](#)

Chantaie Allick is a multi-passionate writer and journalist based in Toronto. Words, ideas, and issues feed her. Follow her on Twitter at [@Chantaie](#)

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I was afraid to go to Rwanda. The reasons why are complicated.

Part of me was terrified at the thought of traveling to the heart of East Africa, with no sense of how I'd be received. I was afraid to hate it and afraid to love it. I was afraid it would disappoint and afraid it would live up to all my expectations. Would it conform to Western stereotypes of a developing African nation? Would I be less safe, especially compared to white foreigners who have an obvious mark of otherness? Would locals treat me differently for being a black Canadian? I had many questions and only one route to the answers.

I went, and learned early on that I'd be received differently in Africa—not with the uncertain weariness of strangers encountering a black person at home, but something equally disconcerting.

During my second week in Rwanda, I visited a class of teenage boys who were learning English at a local community center. Following an hour of grammar lessons, during which the students shot me sidelong glances, their teacher invited them to ask me questions. At first, they skirted around an issue that likely had been on their minds for some time; then one brave young boy, long-limbed and awkward, finally stood up. He looked me over from head to toe, took a deep breath and said, “So.”

“So,” I responded.

“Okay,” he said while taking another breath, preparing himself.

“Okay,” I parroted back, giving him time.

“Are your parents...” the boy began in his puberty-stricken voice, but then paused and looked around at his friends. “Are they...are they black?”

I laughed loudly. “Yes, of course.”

I understood his confusion. I looked like them, but was foreign in my accent and carriage.

## I LOOKED LIKE THEM, BUT WAS FOREIGN IN MY ACCENT AND CARRIAGE.

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Based on my square jaw and dark skin, locals assumed I was from Ghana, and welcomed me as such. They treated me differently than my white roommates, who always attracted attention wherever they went; locals were sometimes more deferential to me, sometimes less so, depending on the situation and individual. I learned to roll my eyes and shrug when someone was especially ingratiating to my white friends, while barely acknowledging my existence. I was in a place that seemed to value foreigners more than its own people, which is certainly not the case at home.

Black and white hold very different meanings in Rwanda than in North America—but also sadly similar ones. In Rwanda, black is beautiful in ways it isn't at home, yet white is also foreign and special. The two compete. In the end though, like in North America, one race is always viewed as superior; which one, however, depended on who was looking.

That dichotomy was apparent in every encounter I had in Rwanda, and colored my experiences of the locals. But I found myself even more conflicted by white foreigners who also lived in the country's dusty capital city of Kigali.

One particular experience with my mostly white roommates still lingers in my mind now. We met at home after particularly bad days that involved being locked in stadiums, trapped in the middle of nowhere with creepy moto drivers, and almost getting beaten by police.

The conversation eventually turned to my roommates' frustration over locals calling them *mzungu* (which means "white person" in the Bantu languages of East Africa) begging them for money, and staring at them with "dead eyes," as one put it. In Rwanda, my roommates were racial minorities, and they were uncomfortable with that.

I found myself wanting to defend the locals, people who looked more like me than other Canadians back home. I didn't feel as removed from Rwanda—my days were spent eating regional cuisine and debating economic development with coworkers, while my nights included dancing with friends at the local bar— so I couldn't sit back and criticize it as readily.

I was faced with one of those choices you often have to make as a person of color in the West. Have they crossed a line? Is it worth saying something? Am I being oversensitive?

It's a difficult line to navigate.

Sometimes I looked around Kigali, a city of red roads and distant hills, and thought how lucky locals were to have grown up in a place where most everyone looked like them. These sorts of internal struggles likely don't come up as often.

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A question I get repeatedly from strangers in North America is, "Where are you *really* from?" with the emphasis on "really" suggesting that I don't actually belong in my birth country.

"I'm Canadian whether or not you recognize me as authentically so," I want to respond.

In Rwanda, I was accepted in a way I never was at home. Locals would address me in Kinyarwandan, the local language, and shot me confused looks when I

responded in hesitant English. Some thought I was putting on airs, but once we established that I wasn't a local and didn't speak Swahili either, they'd want to know where I was from.

"Canada," I'd say.

"Really?" they'd reply with surprise and a hint of disbelief.

They knew my ancestors couldn't be from Canada, so they wanted more information. How was this possible? (Western immigration can be a strange thing if you're not a direct result of it.)

But I think the real issue was that they couldn't believe I identify as Canadian. Many Rwandese were born outside the country to exiled and refugee parents, but still identify as Rwandan. How could I—a woman born to black Jamaican parents—see myself as being from a place they viewed as snowy white?

It's because Canada is the only home I know.

Rwanda turned out to be a gift; it put me in touch with my Jamaican roots. I started asking questions and wondering about the things my ancestors went through to eventually produce me. Sure, it's clichéd—the North American visiting Africa, and feeling a connection to the motherland—but that is my story.

I was afraid to travel to Africa, but I did, and will likely return. I want to see more of this lush, complicated continent because I expect it will continue to teach me more about myself, and welcome me as one of its own.

Everyone has their own reasons for going. For me, it was a surreal homecoming—if home is a far-off place where you don't quite fit in.