

I was born in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, in a middle class family of four. My father worked in insurance and my mother was a secondary school teacher. My early years in Sierra Leone were clouded by a pending civil war which eventually ravaged the country for eleven years. At the age of 5, my mother took her two daughters and fled to The Gambia, where we stayed as refugees for five years. Living in The Gambia came with the freedom of being away from danger, as well as the vulnerability of being “a second class citizen” as refugees were treated. However, my mother ensured that her two daughters would get the best education and would not be subjected to the qualms of being an “alien”. We returned to Sierra Leone in 2002 and I enrolled at The Annie Walsh Memorial School, one of the most prestigious schools for girls in Sierra Leone. I was one of the youngest students in my class, but that did not stop me from setting high academic standards for myself. I eventually attained first position in Sierra Leone in the Basic National Exams in 2006 and won several scholarships to continue my secondary school education at The Annie Walsh. As a result of my academic achievements, I was selected in 2008 to join the inaugural class of the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, South Africa. The African Leadership Academy is a pan-African school that selects students from all over Africa with the most promise of leadership and excellence, to undergo a two year A-level program as well as Leadership, Entrepreneurship and African Studies as part of the curriculum. Being at ALA was an amazing experience! I got to meet and make friends from students from all over the African continent-Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria, Morocco, there were so many different cultures and rich perspectives. After ALA, I got into The College of Wooster in Ohio, and that was the beginning of a four year journey in the United States. This was my first time in the US, and at first, everything seemed to be just like I saw in the Hollywood movies. The town I lived in had beautiful houses with white picket fences and it

the streets were lined with pine and oak trees . However, it was in this quiet mid-western town that I had my very first experience of racial differences and racism. I was a black girl, living on a campus of just 6% international students, and attracted stares when I went to the local Walmart or downtown to eat at a local restaurant. In my sophomore year, I started to experience an identity crisis. So many issues were new to me, and I did not feel equipped enough to deal with them. In my mind, I identified as Sierra Leonean. However, many Americans did not seem to know where that was, so I would say I was West African-African, it eventually became.

However, identifying as that came with a lot of stereotypes that I had not even known existed about Africa. I would get asked if I washed my hair every day, how come my English was so good, what was the name of my village(even though I had lived in cities all my life) ,and I also had to experience the torturous and brutal disembodiment of my name's pronunciation. I was confused and also experienced low self-esteem, I felt as though I was both invisible and hyper visible at the same time. Two things helped me. Firstly, I had a very good support network of friends- Africans and African Americans, who helped me to make sense of the racial dynamics in the US. I also decided to take a break from both the US and from regular academics and did an experiential learning and immersion program in Brazil. As a young black African in Brazil, my experience was quite unique. I could identify with some of the cultural values of Afro Brazilians and I was taken as a sister, especially as I was from West Africa, where Afro-Brazilians were captured as slaves during the transatlantic slave trade. My experience in Brazil was wonderful and I returned to the U.S and back to school, refreshed and ready to finish my final year. After graduation, I was fortunate to get a job at Ashesi University in Ghana. I was happy to be close to home again and also to be able to blend in, except for when Ghanaians find out I can't speak *twi*

at all. In Ghana, I have found a sense of home, I don't stand out too much, I identify with so many cultural and social norms, and I feel more comfortable with my identity as a black woman.

I am a 23 year old Sierra Leonean, and I graduated in May 2015 from the College of Wooster in Ohio US. I majored in History and Political Science and my Senior Independent Study was about the growth of slums in Brazil and South Africa during the military dictatorship and apartheid respectively. I currently work as a Faculty Intern in the department of Arts and Sciences at Ashesi University in Accra. I am an avid reader and writer, and I run my own blog at www.sepiadahlia.com.