

Toubab, sukuundu ma no weidi buuy. Kona, bandu maa laabanni.

*White person, your hair is so pretty. But, your body is dirty.*

For eighteen months, I lived in Senegal, West Africa. For eighteen months, I listened to strangers, acquaintances and, at times, my closest friends refer to me as “toubab.” Toubab is the name given to white foreigners. Sometimes it’s used as an identifier. I would hear my sister say over the phone, “You know, Bienta Toubab.” Which was important because I was living in a family that had four women named Bienta. But it was still hard. It was never, “Bienta Voluteer,” since I was there because of my position as a Peace Corps Volunteer. It hurt to hear my host sister, someone I loved and respected from the moment I set foot in my family compound, refer to me by the same negative name as the mean shop owner down the road.

I tried to cover up my whiteness by participating in local beauty practices. I attempted to wear local clothing, but that brought me nothing but awkward situations with old ladies telling me I was like a child and couldn’t dress myself as they pulled up my shirt, untied my skirt and retied it for me. This usually took place in public and caused me more pain than it was worth.

I thought I had succeeded in distracting from my whiteness when I got my hair braided for the first time. I would hear people in the market exclaim, “Oh, look at the Toubab, she braided her hair.” I thought I had really figured it out when I sat through the six hours of discomfort to get my first extensions.

I was really something special. Everywhere I went, women, men, children, everyone would loudly exclaim, “Whoa, look at the Toubab. Her hair is so pretty!” I still stuck out, but I stuck out for a good reason. I was a white girl who had pretty African hair.

But when I would return home from the market, emerge from my hut, return from a taxi ride, I wouldn’t have to wait long before someone who knew me, someone who would feel comfortable touching me, would ask me, “What’s wrong with your skin? Your body looks dirty?”

What are all these marks on your arms? Have you not bathed today?"

I would try to explain the science of the skin. I would spend what felt like hours with a French dictionary on top of my Pulaar dictionary, the two languages I needed to communicate with in Senegal, trying to explain that melanin would collect in certain spots and it didn't mean I was dirty or a big mosquito bit me, it was just my skin.

I gave up. I turned it around. I made it a joke. "I want to be black like you! Look at my right arm, it's turning black!" It was a joke that got laughs. Everyone forgot that they were talking about my dirty white skin. I never wanted to be black. I just wanted the questions to stop.