

Africa is Where the Heart is, but Home is Chicago

By Vee L. Harrison

I stood under a cotton tree, February 7, 2023 in Marrakech, Morocco. As a Black woman living in America's third largest city, I felt small. I realized what a cotton tree once meant for my ancestors, and what standing under one in 2023 meant for me and my legacy.

I was there in Marrakech for the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Show, but of course I knew traveling to Africa would mean so much more. It is unarguably the very land in which Africans were stripped of and where our culture and truth was stripped down. It was emotional having my feet in the grass and taking in the air of the diaspora. I heard voices when I walked down the busy streets of Marrakech, and not just the voices of the traders or the sellers, but the voices of who once was. The howling pains of slaves, runaways, and babies being snatched from their mothers arms. I heard screams of intimidating white slave masters, and the whips against the wind and human flesh.

I thought of works by artists like Kehinde Wiley, making a bold statement of Black lives slain in modern times as they were in the 17th and 18th centuries during the enslavement of Africans. My mind was of course on my own brother, Darryl Jr., who had been murdered just two years to the date I stepped foot on African soil.

It was no coincidence.

Urban life in Chicago where driving and parking are typically overregulated, created culture shock for me as I witnessed small cars and loud mopeds make their ways through narrow streets, competing with horse and carriages and sometimes bicycles with no specified bike lanes. It was a bit of a calm chaos, knowing that I was among family I had never met, never encountered. It felt different from the family I actually grew up around, and shared time with.

One moment that trumps many is the moment I climbed a hill outside of the local tannery and witnessed three small children playing in rubble. They had no toys, just each other and the earth surrounding them, concrete, hills, and rocks. I witnessed the Moroccan children run with smiles, laughing and playing carefree. I instantly wanted more for them, felt empathy towards what I saw as poor and unfit conditions to play. Then I realized, their reality was just that...their idea of play was chasing one another on rocky hills, on desolate land. In their minds, they weren't without - in their minds, they weren't poor.

And that is Africa -- sometimes poor, and desolate. And then Africa, the beautiful, with historic buildings like the new and old medinas or modern hotels like the 100 year old Hotel La Mamoumia. And in all those stark differences, I realized that Africa was more than what school books and tv commercials portrayed. Africa was far more than the origin of African slavery. It was and is a land of stories, of grief and of freedom. I walked the land proudly, knowing that I am a part of that story and an element of that rich culture.

The inner workings of me brought the inner city energy to where my heart remains -- Africa. Although Chicago is forever home, I'm not sure my home is where my heart is... my heart is certainly of the African diaspora and my blood flows through me like the Nile River. Each moment on that side of the Earth was confirmation that where I stood, was who I am. And after a week's time, I traveled back to the states a different person, with a completely different understanding of home.