

By Oyinkan Braithwaite

Dear Durham,

I am on my sofa, balancing my laptop on my knees, wearing the Minnie Mouse dressing gown my brother got me for my birthday. It is furry attire in a season when I should really be dressed in light breathable fabrics, but I look adorable in it.

I wake up earlier and earlier these days, because of the light streaming in between the parted curtains. It is bright and it is a very warm 29 degrees. If I were to close my eyes, I could almost trick myself into believing that I was in Nigeria. I am not. I write to you from a picturesque little town in the South East of England.

I cannot stress enough how much I adore this town. I was first drawn to it because of its charming name; the way it felt on my tongue, the sound of it when spoken. And my instincts were not wrong. In this dear town, the buses wait patiently for the elderly to approach, the passengers say thank you, there is a precious park close by, and two larger parks a short drive away. I am grateful for the quiet, for the convenience, for its beauty, for the relaxed nature of the people here. And the town is still diverse enough, that I don't feel like a fish out of water. It is not as grand or striking as Durham perhaps, but for us, it is perfect.

I am accustomed to travelling between England and Nigeria. Both countries are home. If I take the right airline, they are only six hours apart. But for many years, I was living in Nigeria and now I am based here. My husband and I prayed about this move. Lagos is a city that can drain you if you let it - the heat, the constant pulsing, the road rage, the pollution, the ever-present tension between the rich and the poor, the deeply-embedded corruption. And yet, when asked if I have relocated, my response is always that I have 'semi-moved' or 'partly-relocated'. I make it clear to family and friends that I will be back in Lagos soon; because *this* 'semi-relocation' has stirred strong feelings of guilt. I cannot shake the sentiment that I have betrayed the motherland.

And I am not alone.

There is a great exodus being made by my generation from Lagos to 'the abroad'. It isn't the *first* time this has happened in Nigeria's history, but in recent years the

migration has reached near comical levels. Every other person I talk to is planning their 'escape'. Why? The value of the Naira has plummeted whilst costs continue to rise; security is poor; healthcare is in shambles; the quality of education is dropping; and after the events of October 2020, many have lost hope.

And then there is the privilege that comes with possessing certain passports. I have always had two passports, two citizenships, two homes. And I have seen the difference in attitude when I present my red passport to when I present my green passport. It is curious. I have not changed, but the perception towards me often does. One more reason for those who seek to shed their green, white, green skin and put on another; any other.

Durham, perhaps this would be hard for you to imagine, though the UK has been inundated with its own set of challenges recently; it is still unlike the various difficulties that come with living in Nigeria, having a Nigerian passport, being categorized as Nigerian. A lot of people want to 'japa' (a term used to describe the act of leaving). However, relocation is, more often than not, reserved for the privileged. Immigration policy does not simply open its doors to anyone, it gets to pick and choose. Those who are able to relocate smoothly have money, and/or are the most attractive in terms of experience, industry and professional standing. Nigeria is losing its doctors, its nurses, its engineers, and its IT professionals. It is a sorry state of affairs; but people will continue to seek a better life for themselves and for their families until the government is able to get its act together.

I often wonder what will happen to Nigeria, and what part I will play in its future. Though there is very little light, little water, very little reason for my love of Nigeria, my pride in Nigeria continues to flourish; it does flourish. If anything it flowers in adversity and toughens when challenged. I have a love for Nigeria that defies all reason. And I suspect that, in the not so distant future, I will call her home again.

Yours Sincerely,
Oyinkan Braithwaite.

