

College Essay

Bright oranges, vibrant yellows, and saturated reds dominate my surroundings. My eyes trace the variety of buildings displayed in the foreground, contrasting with the bright blue ocean in the background. I step back from my sketchbook and reference the scenic view; I color the cotton-like clouds and crashing teal waves. These colors and visual cues feel very familiar to me, a sense of home I experience every time I visit São Paulo, Brazil.

My parents moved to the US from Brazil before I was born. They left all they were acquainted with behind to pursue opportunities that only America could provide. The rest of the family remained in São Paulo. I carry two passports, speak fluent Portuguese, and was named after an Antonio Carlos Jobim song; however, when I visit Brazil, I feel as "gringa" as possible. I sound American when I speak; my blue eyes are an anomaly, my missing out on obvious local references doesn't go unnoticed, and even my tendency to burn rather than tan is the butt of many jokes. When I was younger, these facts didn't bother me; they made me unique. As I've grown older, I've felt like these attributes only furthered the gap between my family and me. Nothing could shorten the 6,401 miles of involuntary distance that Americanized me.

Last year, I visited Brazil, and the sense of difference that I felt was stronger than it had ever been before. One night, I remember sitting at my grandma's kitchen table, around my family, drinking her hot coffee, feeling guilty that I preferred it iced, feeling guilty that I didn't understand every word in the conversation. Tears filled my eyes. My sister saw me crying at the table and asked me what was wrong. I told her that I didn't feel that I was a part of the family, that I hated my accent, hated my pale skin and blue eyes, hated that I confused past verb tenses, and hated my American identity because it's what divided me from my Brazilian family. She began describing my grandpa, from whom I received my blue eyes. She described him as both

the whitest man in the world and the most Brazilian man she knew. He had the Brazilian ability to make a stranger feel like family through his vivid storytelling. Thinking about what connected me to my grandfather, I started to reflect on what made me feel Brazilian.

Every time I walk through my favorite Brazilian street art fair, Feirinha Hippie, I feel connected to my Brazilian identity. The colorful and rich paintings influence my own creative choices; the juxtaposition of organic and geometric shapes in each unique work of art is where I draw my inspiration; even the sense of family that is subtly instilled in each painting makes me feel at home. Art helps me connect with my heritage in a way that language can't. No accents, distance, or physical attributes could change that. My Brazilian heritage is evident in how I feel and communicate as an artist but more importantly, as an individual.

Being Brazilian has made me more accepting of differences and allowed me to acknowledge each person's individuality and complexity. I used to believe that identity was black and white. You could only be one or the other; I now can see that each identity is filled with an array of colors. I have learned that not quite being completely part of one country means that I can call both places my home. I cherish being a more unconventional counterpart to my Brazilian family because that identity is unapologetically mine.