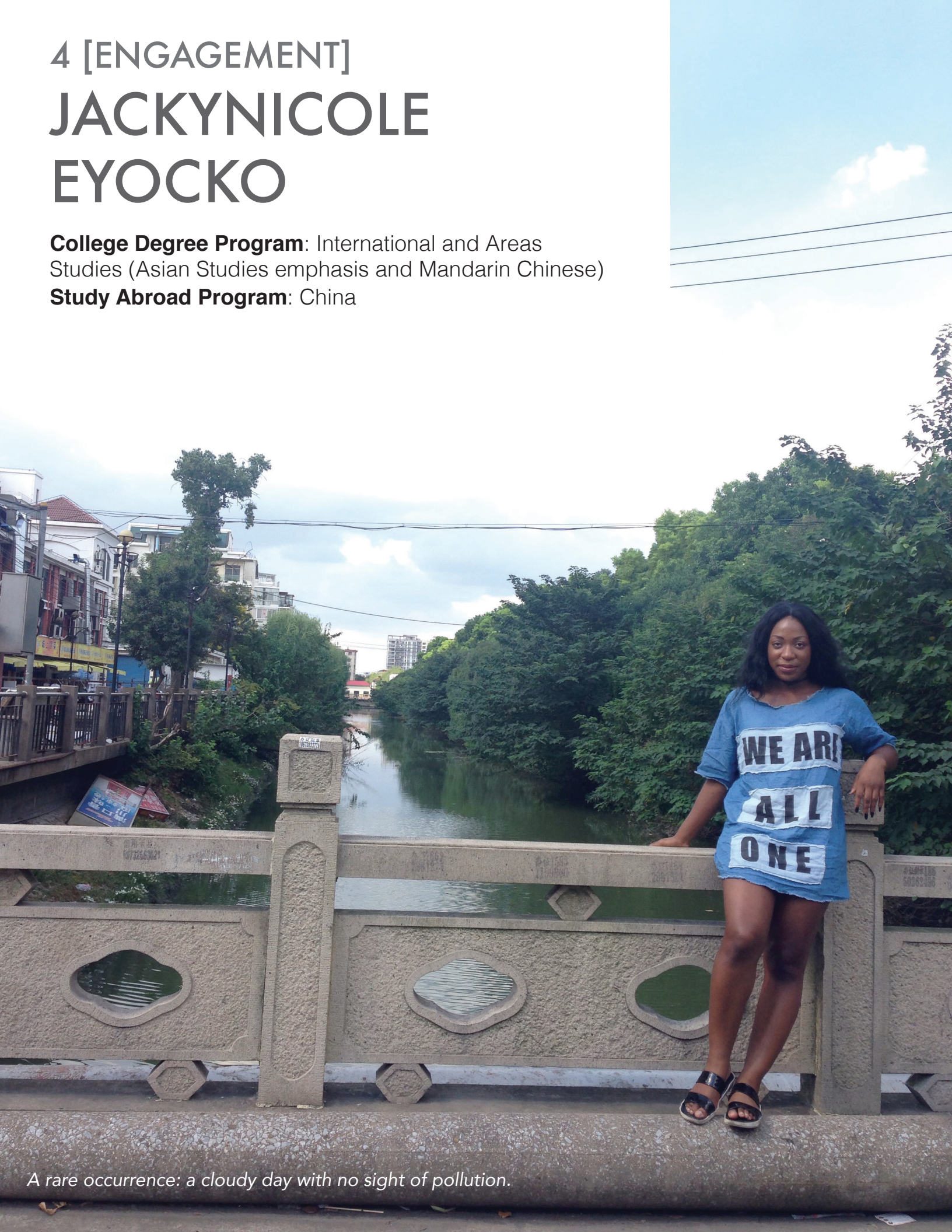


4 [ENGAGEMENT] JACKYNICOLE EYOCKO

College Degree Program: International and Areas Studies (Asian Studies emphasis and Mandarin Chinese)
Study Abroad Program: China



A rare occurrence: a cloudy day with no sight of pollution.

I made the mistake of taking the direct flight from Dallas to Shanghai. This flight consisted of babies crying for 14 hours straight, documentaries on Chinese opera and sleep—lots of it. While sleeping, I dreamt I was going to walk out of Pudong International Airport and it was going to smell like freedom and the journey of a lifetime, like you see in Hollywood movies. Instead, outside the airport reeked of burning gasoline and sticky tofu, which is an unpleasant combination. My cab driver, who I had hired a few weeks prior, showed up twenty minutes late and waited until I put my own bags in the taxi. I was not in Oklahoma anymore—no southern hospitality. The university I attended was in Baoshan, at least a 45-minute drive from the airport—talk about an expensive cab ride.

The first sentence my driver said to me was, “Obama, Yes We Can!” I chuckled and immediately knew I was in for a journey of a lifetime.

Apart from moving to the United States at the tender age of eight, this was my first trip abroad without any family. I was alone and the very first days of being in Shanghai were the most difficult. It turns out the Chinese public was obsessed with my skin and hair, and sometimes I would stay in my dorm room to avoid direct contact. Obviously, this was not the best idea, especially because I am an extrovert by birth. I took all

the negative thoughts and self-consciousness and engaged the only way I knew how: through dance.

It all began when one of the international student advisors from the university approached me and asked if I had any interest in leading a dance for an upcoming showcase. I immediately responded yes! The next few days consisted of choreographing a show with one of my newly found friends, Vee, who hailed from South Africa. From there, we began to round up people from all over. Our dance team consisted of boys and girls from China, Uzbekistan, Madagascar, South Africa, Panama, Ireland, Russia, Congo, Kazakhstan and Peru. During this process, I realized once again that the Chinese members of the group were infatuated with American culture and particularly interested in African American culture. Some were puzzled at the very idea that black people came from America, while others already had an idea of what blackness represents. I took this moment as a learning experience, an opportunity to positively influence their opinion on the plight of the black body. I was able to accomplish this through dance—by showing that we are truly only human.

Next, I had an opportunity to teach an Afro-Zumba dance class to the older ladies in the neighborhood. The only problem was that they were not fully aware that a black woman was



“To dance is to be out of yourself. Larger, more beautiful, more powerful.”
— Agnes De Mille, American dancer and choreographer



The mothers, aunts and sisters I never knew I had.

going to teach the class. On our first interaction, they glared at me with such disgust and then proceeded to the dance studio owner to express their frustration. He told them to give me a chance, and they did. We went back to the dance room where we talked, laughed and danced. They confessed, much to my surprise, that I was the first black person they had ever met. These women from a small town within the confines of Shanghai had no prior contact with persons of African origin; they did not know who we were and they did not know who I was. As time went on, more Chinese women attended my Monday and Wednesday night Zumba classes. They engaged more.

Xinhua News wrote an article about police brutality in America. One day after class, one of the ladies approached me with article in hand. She asked if I would join her and her family for dinner the following week. I gladly accepted. While at dinner, her older sister began to pose questions about police brutality in America and about black lives. I was not sure if I should open that can of worms at dinner, but I thought, when else would a black woman like me ever have

the chance to discuss black lives with Chinese people? I went ahead and continued with the discussion. We talked for hours about Chinese traditions, I introduced them to the greatness that is Beyoncé and we ended with an emotional conversation about the unfortunate treatment of black people in their country. These individuals were the sincerest people I met in China. During my time abroad, because of my skin color, I was faced with many challenges. Often I was ready to just pack up my bags and go back to a place that I was familiar—a space where I felt accepted. These people at dinner, however, reminded me what humanity looked like.

With studying in China, you get the good food, the bad air and the questionable looks. But most importantly, you get an opportunity to change perspectives and even alter your own preconceived notions. One of the biggest lessons I learned was that everything is fluid—minds, thoughts and actions—but engagement is solid. I had the unique opportunity to represent not only my university and my country, but myself, as a black woman.