



Rants and Randomness with Luvvie Ajayi

Passport Privilege is Real – BONUS Episode #6

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My people, welcome to Rants & Randomness. I'm Luvvie Ajayi, your Side-Eye Sorceress, and this is my podcast where I talk about things I'm loving, things that's on my mind and I'm here at the [Chicago Recording Company](#) bringing you all the radio voice as always. From time to time I like to bring you a deep dive episode on a topic that is on my spirit, and on this episode I want to talk about passport privilege.

But first I want to give a shout out to this episode's sponsor, [Black Girl Sunscreen](#). You all have been sliding into my DMs asking me about my skin and how I keep it glowing. Well one key to bomb skin is protecting it, and we need sunscreen. And I use [Black Girl Sunscreen](#) to keep it cute in the summer and beyond.

I started using [Black Girl Sunscreen](#) over a year ago and I fell in love with it. It's an everyday SPF 30 moisturizer for the face and body specifically designed for women of color. Why? Because the other sunscreens leave us with that gray film over our faces looking ashy, and ash is totally my kryptonite. [Black Girl Sunscreen](#) is like, "I got you." And it rubs it completely, no ashiness and it gives you a little glow.

So, I know some folks think people of color don't need sunscreen. That's totally false. Our skin is melanated but we still need all that protection because the sun is a hater. Everyone still needs sunscreen. We still burn and we're susceptible to sun damage like sunspots, premature aging, wrinkles, lines, all that, right? So that's why you need sunscreen.

[Black Girl Sunscreen](#) has natural ingredients such as jojoba, cocoa, Shea butter, avocado, carrot seed juice, plus they're doing it fragrance-free, environmentally friendly, and without disrupting your hormones. Plus the founder's a dope black woman whose name is Shontay Lundy. I'm a huge fan. So go check them out. [blackgirlsunscreen.com](#) on any social media platform with the handle @blackgirlsunscreen. And if you use the code L-U-V-B-G-S you get 20% off. So that's LUVBGS, L-U-V-B-G-S and for all my Niger people, [Black Girl Sunscreen](#) is actually now in Nigeria in [Casabella](#) stores. So you all go check it out, [blackgirlsunscreen.com](#), protect your skin.

I just got back from Barcelona, Spain from a speaking engagement that I had, and I got through customs in two minutes. And even though I'm a frequent traveler, it prompted me to reflect on how I can have

access to another country without questions so quickly. I've been to over 25 countries and I typically don't pause and be like, "Wow, that was fast." But I don't know what it was about this one that made me stop. And I really realized that passport privilege is real. The citizenship that we have comes with some perks, some of it comes with a lot of problems, and the books that we carry literally control how free we are to roam this planet.

So I decided to look it up. The world's most powerful passports. So according to [CNN travel](#), which just came out with this updated list, I think March 2019, Japan has the most powerful passport because if you hold that passport, you can access 190 countries around this world.

Second is Singapore and South Korea at 189. France and Germany give you 188. Denmark, Finland, Italy, Sweden give you 187. Luxembourg and Spain, 186. And then the US, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Portugal, Norway, Netherlands, Austria give you 185. For those wondering, Canada, Belgium, Greece, and Ireland are at 184.

So ultimately being a US citizen means I can go to 185 countries almost unencumbered. I have free access to these places at least for a week. Of course, a lot of these places you can't just go and stay and become a resident, but I can go on vacation at the drop of a dime to 185 countries of my choice. Now, it's funny because I talked about this on Instagram and a lot of Canadians kept coming to my Instagram to be like, "Well, our passport is more powerful than the US passport."

First of all, relax yourselves. We're not talking about you and we're not talking about perception, because our president is a walking Cheeto. I'm talking about pure facts in terms of access to where we go. US passports have one more country than Canadian passports. A fair statement is that our passports are just as powerful, but I went down that hill. Ultimately the point still stands. Besides being male and white, one of the biggest privileges in the world is having one of the passports in those top 15 countries, having a United States passport. I'm a frequent traveler and I still have a sense of wonderment because how I can land on another continent in another country and be through customs, be able to walk through the line in two minutes because of the book that I hold. That's huge.

I understand that people leave the only homes they ever know because of this blue book. People leave their loved ones because of this blue book. Some people die because of this, and it just made me reflect on how we take certain things for granted. We might not always see the US as land of the free, but to be honest, we are freer than most.

Now, if you've ever had to get a visa to a country, you know how much freedom that this can buy you. Having a passport like the US passport, like the UK passport, like the Canadian passport, like the Japanese passport. Having to get a visa is a whole process, because you will have to get questioned, you pay fees. For people who hold passports like Nigeria for example or really any sub-Saharan African country, anybody who holds a passport to Middle-Eastern countries will understand what it's like to want to travel and not be able to get there because you have to go through a whole lot of red tape.

If you don't know, when you have to get a visa to a country like the US and let's say your passport is like a Nigerian passport, there's an application fee which is like \$160 to \$200. You have to get a letter of invitation from someone who lives in that country, essentially vouching for you and saying they're responsible for you. You have to show bank statements to prove that you have enough money to spend when you come to this country because apparently they don't want the leeches. Because you know how classist a lot of this is. Some of these countries will require you to also submit your resume, even if you're just coming on vacation. They want to know who you are. And then you also have to show travel itinerary, which is ultimately you have to book everything, your hotel and your airfare as if they've already said yes before they say yes to you. And let's say they say no to you, you just lost your money. All of that.

When you have to get a visa, it can be really, really, really a problem, and a lot of times people will get denied. After doing all of that and spending hundreds and resources in interviews, you can still get denied.

So what having the US passport does is it gives you access so that if it's Wednesday and I say, "I want to go to Kenya on Friday." I can buy my ticket and walk into the country. And even a lot of countries, they require visas of the United States. A lot of them will actually allow US citizens to get visas when they land. The United States does not allow on demand, I'm just going to land at the airport visas. That's not how it rocks.

So this is where the privilege piece comes in. When I talk about passport privilege, our privileges are the certain advantages that give us a better chance to succeed in a world where every part of identity determines how likely we are to do well.

Some of my privileges are that I'm straight, I'm Christian, I'm cisgender, I'm able bodied, I'm college educated, and I'm not poor. If you're an American, if you're a British, if you're Japanese, these are global privileges because of the position that they play on a global scale.

So being American gives me access and treatment that billions of others don't have. And I have to acknowledge that because it doesn't mean there is no struggle if I'm a citizen of this country, be clear. Like how saying white privilege does not mean you've had a struggle-free life strictly because of it.

Acknowledging your privilege does not negate your struggles in life.

So when I was talking about this on Instagram, I got pushback, a lot of pushback from a few folks who tried to argue with me that passport privileges does not mean anything if you're black and you're traveling. And I have to disagree, I have to completely disagree.

Traveling extensively sometimes teaches you that American privilege can actually help you if you're black and at a foreign border. Our blue passport is definitely not a get out of racism free card, but it definitely lets you move different. And being Nigerian like I am, I know firsthand what it's like to use a passport that's not the US one and the instant disrespect that you get accustomed no matter where you

go. Because Nigerian passport is green, they see the green. How customs treats you is absolutely tied to the passport that you are holding. And I think for a lot of Americans, we tend to center our struggles even as others share their stories and experiences, and we have a habit sometimes of thinking that our pain is the biggest, and this was a moment of perspective. So it's easy for us to think, "Oh, I'm black. That is going to be the biggest thing that marginalizes me." When you walk out of the country, when you are flying into another country, you actually see that sometimes this blue book trumps your black skin, and that's real.

But in talking about the passport privilege, when I say the American passport gets me into 185 countries without visa, you might think, "Oh, that's not a big deal". Comparatively, the least powerful passports to hold, Palestine, you only get 39 countries. Sudan, Eritrea, you get 38. Yemen, they can only go to 37. Pakistan, you can only go to 33. Somalia and Syria, you can go to 32. And Afghanistan and Iraq, you can only go to 30 countries without visas with those passports.

I got so many DMs, y'all. So many DMs of stories from people who hold passports from countries that are not in the United States, and all of the things that they have to go through to travel. And I thought it was really important to amplify this because I was also getting DMs from people who were saying they never realized that passports actually mattered this much. They assume that all passports were created equal. They just thought, "I never had to think about that" which actually in itself is a privilege. Never having to think about your lack of access to the world is a privilege that a lot of Americans have.

But yeah, so I got a lot of notes from people who were sharing their stories. I just kept on getting more and more stories and a lot of them were heartbreaking. So I'm going to share some with you that really touched my spirit, and some that just gave great points.

Somebody sent me a message saying, "Barbadian British and naturalized American citizen. I can hold any of these passports if I so choose. And I've had each one over the course of my life. I stick with the American passport because it's less hassle. I've traveled to Korea with my Barbados passport back in the day and was stuck in the airport for hours because they didn't even know what or where Barbados is and were suspicious that the passport was fake. And coupled with the fact that I'm black, it didn't help. This was way before Rihanna existed."

So the fact that certain passports can be shown to people at foreign borders and be considered fake when ours is instantly given the highest respect?

Yo. Privilege.

One of the ones that punched me in the chest the most. "I did not realize the extent of my American travel privilege until I witnessed my Ghanaian mother-in-law show up for more than six visa appointments only to be denied each time. She needed a visa to travel to attend our wedding. I have a wedding photo with our parents without her in it and it's a sad reminder of how all the red tape kept her from seeing her son get married. She died 10 months after our wedding. I never got to meet her or thank her in person for raising the man of my dreams."

When we talk about the visas, these have real life implications. This woman was not allowed to come into the US to see her son get married because she held a Ghanaian passport. And let's be real, there's a lot of anti-blackness also attached to how visas are passed on. So even though the blue passport does help you when you're black, when you're out of the country, the fact that a lot of countries that are black-majority countries, the US makes it really hard for them to get visas to visit.

So a lot of sub-Saharan African countries, yo, the visa requirements to get to the US are hardcore. People miss out on life because their passports require them to do all these things and jump through all these hoops.

I got this other DM that said, "One lady I know got her visa after contorting herself and basically giving them all but her firstborn child. And then when she got there, they deported her and gave her no reason. All that money-gone. Same with an acquaintance who couldn't go on her honeymoon despite having a visa because of an old law that affects Nigerian passports. It was humiliating. Her honeymoon."

There's that stuff.

Somebody else sent me this piece: "My husband travels with a Liberian passport, although he's been a permanent resident of the US for 30 years and he's detained every time he travels. He's questioned about Ebola and health issues in his Homeland all the time, and funny there isn't a librarian stamp in his passport because he hasn't been there for years. The first time we ever traveled we were separated and I waited forever not knowing what happened and we missed our connecting flight back to New York city. Now I demand to bypass kiosks to go with him. I'm Jamaican-American, but choose to use my blue passport for all the reasons described. I've traveled the world since I was 19 and always done it in peace."

That's huge. Being able to move without question.

There's one thing to get the visa and then you get there. They still will question you extensively. And there's one thing to just not even have to worry about that.

Somebody else said, "My Tanzanian passport means no spontaneous trips, lengthy visa applications, high fees, provision of personal info on my bank account, rent, marriage, children and biometrics. [For those who don't know biometrics it's like taking your fingerprints, sometimes actually making you do blood work], and still sometimes the visa doesn't come in time. I missed my nephew's graduation in London and an anniversary trip to Paris because of visa delays."

These are the things we take for granted, that we can plan quick international trips, right? It's one of those things.

And then here's the thing about our passport that is even more powerful. This message that I got. "I'm an avid traveler and have been to over 65 countries, mainly for work but also for pleasure. This would not have been possible if I didn't hold a blue book. [That's the American passport.] I also hold a diplomatic passport from Liberia and the privileges my American passport affords me far outweigh what a diplomatic passport from the American country could. I thank my lucky stars every day that I hold a US passport and notice the difference in treatment every single time I travel. I even get treated better with a US passport than with a diplomatic passport when I travel back home to my own country, Liberia. It's definitely one of those first world privileges that I value, cherish, and never take for granted."

So again, if your diplomatic passport from a country still doesn't match up to the regular passport or regular shmegular passport from another country, that lets you know the value that people place on it.

And of course I know people will be like, "Oh everything is perception." Perception matters. Everything is a social construct, money is a social construct, but the power attached to certain things that we hold, has real life consequences and it's real. Somebody even talked about how international students typically get... Sometimes they miss the first week of classes because they're still waiting on their visas.

This message. "I work at a college. It's a guarantee we will have international students who can't make it for the first day of classes because their student visas keep getting denied. At schools, we are at mercy of the embassies. Also, we have parents who can't make graduation because they're denied travel visas. We also have students who don't visit home at all during their college career because they know they may not make it back. All of this usually happens to students from countries where our government is antagonistic. International students are brave."

And that's real. The stuff we never think about. And then somebody also made the point of how... Black people were sending me these messages by the way.

"International travel has shown me that I must spend my privilege. I acknowledge it and I speak up and I try to help when I know raggedy mess is going down. Just my American accent has stopped foolishness from happening. I'm glad it's good for something."

Shout out to my girl, Brittany Packnett who talks about how we should spend our privilege. The idea of spending our privilege means in the moments when our privilege puts us in positions of power, we use that power to help somebody who is in a less powerful position. So if I'm American and I'm seeing something happen at a border, and my American passport can give me the power to speak up, I should speak up, right? If I am able bodied and I see somebody who is in a wheelchair getting mistreated, I should use my privilege in that moment to help what's happening. So we should spend our privilege.

It's all just fascinating, but one thing that is clear is anti blackness is real. Anti-blackness is so real no matter where you go, but there are certain things that will help some of that.

Somebody DM-ed me said, "I was staffed on a project that I was supposed to lead. The client required me to be in London a lot, but because I required a visa on my Nigerian passport, I was taking off it with a

quickness. These strong passport countries were and are major colonizers, the countries with the less powerful passports, the colonized. The whole passport power dynamic continues to perpetuate the evil of colonization.”

And that's real. Colonialism has reach still in everything. Bigger than racism, that's colonialism.

So having that conversation was illuminating for a lot of people who said they hadn't thought about just the impact of the passports. And a lot of folks actually let me know that they were going to go get their passports as a result of it. Because if you have this, it's kind of like gold, but we didn't realize we were holding onto gold. Most Americans still don't actually have a passport. Meanwhile, there are people who are dying to get these passports. So if you're listening to this podcast and you don't have your passport, I hope your spirit to go get your passport, your American passport, I think application fee is like \$130. You can get it within a couple of weeks if you expedite it. Some people can get it in a couple of days based on their travel plans.

I want people to get their kids passports because travel really does expand your world. I'm talking you land in another country, you feel like you might still be home because you smell something, you see somebody that looks familiar. It changes your idea, it gives you perspective because sometimes we're so stuck in our worlds and sometimes we are so concerned with the problems that we have that we think our problems are the biggest problems in the world. And I think one thing travel has taught me above all else is I have it better than most people on even my worst day. And that is something that keeps you humble. That is something that allows you to not take any of this for granted and it keeps my gratitude on high.

Thank you for everybody who actually sent me their stories, the ones that I posted, the ones that I didn't post in DMs, and my heart goes out to the people who have some of these heart wrenching stories. The people who know people who have lost their lives over trying to come to a country to make a better life for themselves.

Yeah, I can't help but think about the people who are at our borders who got separated from their kids because they went to find this better life that a lot of us really have that we don't realize we have.

So above all, acknowledging our passport privilege is understanding how fortunate we are to have the citizenship, and not taking for granted all the things that come with it, and recognizing that we have more power than we think, even in the situations when we feel powerless.

So yeah, y'all get your passports.

Shout out to everybody who's in the struggle. If you've ever gotten denied for a visa, if you ever had to feel like you were losing something to visit this country that you went to go to.

Alright, so what I want you to do is if you don't have a passport, definitely get a passport. Get a passport for your kids now, because you don't necessarily need the passport for when you're exactly about to travel. Just have it so you can travel at any moment that you want and spend your privilege. If you are American and you are at a foreign border and you're seeing something happen, if you can help, if you can speak up, if you can be a witness to somebody so they don't get stuck in the airport for hours because that happens, hey, spend your privilege like Brittany Packnet says. And yeah, let's keep having conversation, let's keep being open to seeing the world and let's keep widening our perspective because our worlds are not the center of the world.

Oh, and before you go, in case you haven't heard about my newest project, [The Do-Better Academy](#), I want to tell you about it.

Nine years ago, I got laid off from my full time job as a marketing coordinator. I was working for a nonprofit that taught other nonprofits how to use social media. Budget cuts did me in, drop-kicked me through the goalpost of life, and I panicked because I was the girl who knew she needed her biweekly paychecks to keep my shoe habit going. That's important to me. But what I didn't realize was they did me the biggest favor ever by letting me go. I had to sink or swim. But get this, a month later they hired me to do a Twitter strategy training at a mini conference they were having. And that my friends, was my first ever paid speaking engagement.

That one thing was the beginning of a career that has taken me all over the world in the last decade. It's gotten me on stages and in rooms with billionaires. It's allowed me to live the life that I was too scared to design for myself. Being a public speaker with a [Ted Talk that now has over four million views](#), that was never the plan, but it's the accidental career that I love so much and I'm thankful I get to do. And that is why the first series in my newest venture, [The Do-Better Academy](#) is all about public speaking. I'll be teaching the why and the what of becoming a public speaker and most importantly, the how to create the signature talk that you can pitch yourself to give on countless stages. It all goes back to my love of teaching people the things that I know and I've proven that I can do well over and over again.

My desire to help people to do better, even inspired me to write a book called, [I'm Judging You: The Do-Better Manual](#). So now I'm bringing you [The Do-Better Academy](#). The Do-Better Academy is my online school focusing on teaching people how to thrive in business and career. DBA will have a series of courses with the mission of giving you actionable and concrete takeaways you can use to level up professionally. And to be honest, so many steps to certain types of success can be hidden in mystery. The courses in DBA will allow you to find the information and resources you need to skip past years of struggle and the unknown, like I had. And you learn the skills and the tools and insider tips that can help you and your path to be smoother. So whether you are someone who has always dreamed of giving a talk on a grand stage or whether you just want to become a better communicator in your office, the public speaking course will be valuable to you.

So why am I the right teacher for this? I'm a black woman who's been able to combine all her passions and gifts and create a career for herself that did not exist 20 years ago. Because of my experiences as a writer, author, podcaster, and speaker, I've gotten into some rooms I never knew existed and I've learned a lot of things I wish I knew sooner. So after 10 years of being in several industries at once, I've

also proven everything that I teach. I got receipts for days, and I don't like hoarding information and I want to teach you what I know so you can do this too. All right, so [join the waitlist now](#) so you can get first dibs to sign up when DBA launches in a few weeks.

The first cohort of the public speaking class will be limited to 250 seats. So how do you sign up? You go to [DoBetterAcademy.com](#). This means you'll get a jumpstart on being in the inaugural DBA class, and no, this won't be free. You'll be invested in years of proven knowledge so you can go out and pitch yourself to be compensated well for your work. So sign up, [DoBetterAcademy.com](#). It's going to be dope.

Follow me on social media. I am @Luvvie, L-U-V-V-I-E everywhere and feel free to follow the podcast [@RantsRandomness](#) on Twitter and [@RantsandRandomness](#) on Instagram. I will see you guys on the next episode.