My hometown taught me ignorance is powerful. Though that was a hard reality to learn, I am thankful for the lesson. It gave me something to push back on. At Duke, I recognize my own privileged ignorance daily, hoping to change it. Duke has given me opportunities to see the world and study oppression occurring at home and abroad. However, in many ways, it has made me feel limited in conservative pockets of communities like that from which I came. The more I learn about the morals I see as right, the more I perceive my beliefs as values from which I can not err, and the more I other my out-group back home.

I was speaking with a professor I respect immensely, who, like me, graduated from Duke after growing up in North Carolina, when he told me, “After graduating, I went home and felt like an academic little shit.” He went on to explain his efforts to check himself and work to understand the various communities within which he is entrenched, despite that initial feeling. This made me stop and think.

As a white woman from the South, I’m entrenched in privilege I don’t deserve. Confronting my privilege daily and trying to enter into difficult conversations without fulfilling a problematic white savior trope, I feel compelled to understand and hopefully do my part to alter systems of oppression. My educational research focuses on civic engagement and educational support for refugee youth resettled to the U.S. I have delved into concepts of intersectional segregation and the performance of gender, race, and childhood that individuals undergo in identity construction; I regularly question the implications of my own performance of race and gender, debating my right to enter into these academic discussions. But my internal debate and my experiences have done little to connect me with those I struggle to communicate with back home.

Following my first year at Duke, I completed a service internship in rural Georgetown, South Carolina to better understand the complex racial history of my home region, which catalyzed my interest in issues of discrimination. I was working a relatively short distance from Charleston when Dylann Roof opened fire at Mother Emmanuelt AME Church, taking nine lives. Discussion erupted across the state regarding the Confederate Flag’s potential removal from the State House. When asked my opinion by co-workers, I shared my thoughts as to the dangerous power of the flag’s symbolism and was relieved when I watched the Georgetown County Council unanimously agree to call for the flag’s removal. Engaging in dialogue surrounding the shooting, even attending a service at Mother Emmanuel AME, where I watched international news crews reflect on the hate crime, I came to understand the interconnectivity of international events.

I carried this understanding of global connections with me the following summer, when stationed in Dublin. Metro Éireann, Ireland’s multicultural newspaper founded by a Nigerian immigrant to Ireland, seeks to support the immigrant community in Ireland and encourage those of Irish heritage to better understand other cultures. Reporting with Metro Éireann, I watched young asylum seekers band together to march through North Dublin in the 2016 Dublin Pride Parade; I interviewed members of Anti Racism Network Ireland and Movement of Asylum Seekers
Ireland to better ascertain their opinions on police brutality in America at a Black Lives Matter demonstration. The next year, on the Tube in London, I noticed the headline of one passenger’s local newspaper, blazoned with news regarding the KKK’s Charlottesville riots. Across the world, I learned to talk to people about the U.S. and its problematic history.

Duke gave me these opportunities to learn, to study service ethics and seek to “work with” the communities within which I enter. However, I barely know how to have a conversation with the men in my hometown who champion easy access to guns or the churchgoers who view gay marriage as a sin. I have been a hypocrite staunched in moral righteousness.

After my professor told me about his own post-graduate feelings as an “academic little shit,” he echoed my own sentiments by explaining that at Duke he learned to problematize everything. To a degree, that is important. It keeps us in check. But what he said next was essential for my combined moral and academic growth: “We need to take the time, after problematizing everything, to build things back up.”

So, after Duke, I’ll be trying to do just that. Sure, I’ll fall back into my old habits, but I will make conscious efforts to overcome the polarization I have created between people with differing views and myself. We’re all hypocrites. But instead of sitting around problematizing my own behavior, or the limited net good I can accomplish for the world, I’ll try to build it back up. Wish me luck.