

Hi, My Name is White Foreigner:

An Essay on Being the Other

“All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.” —Friedrich Nietzsche

On weekends I grew up in Disney World.

As an Orlando native, my family had yearly passes, and attendance was a regular occurrence. To my seven year-old self, the Disney characters, with their tiaras and glass slippers, and the foreign tourists, with their fanny packs and sandal socks, were one and the same. I assumed they were all there for my entertainment. Mulan was as fantastical as the Asian tourist, with her snapping camera, bendy-straw soda bottle, and her incoherent explosions of language. Both were extraordinary objects of spectacle and both belonged in the Magic Kingdom. Atop my father’s shoulders, I looked down at the crowds of sun-screened foreigners and identified them as creatures inherently different from myself. They were the Other. Their looks, their culture, their ignorance of how Disney World worked all seemed so silly. As a precocious child, I pitied them.

As I grew older, we sat on park benches and “people-watched,” a spectator sport perpetuating cultural caricatures and furthering this distance between us and “them.” Over melting ice cream, we laughed at the tourist reading the upside-down map, the tour groups in matching t-shirts, and the children on leashes. These things were funny because they were so

foolish, so ignorant of cultural competency. We would never do such things. We knew how to be *normal*.

And my perception of normality was indeed privileged. Ever since my conception, I was always the one on the inside. Never was I spectacle or show; I was the audience. I learned the rules of normality, rules held up by white picket fences, glued together by school art projects, and sung in hymns on Sunday. But these rules were also made of tidy white boxes, placing the anomalous somewhere separate from what I believed to be normal. Because of such rules, the tourists were kept in Disney. These dictates of normality allowed me to understand reality in rendering “social life sensible, predictable, and reasonably accommodating” —to the detriment of those who did not conform (Schwable 780). I did not realize that the constructs that would build *my* identity may also discount the identity of another, or an-*Other*.

Then Spencer was born defective.

Normality was not a part of my little brother’s childhood. Spencer was born with a cleft lip and palate, a genetic birth defect that impaired his ability to eat, speak, or smile properly. Spencer’s cleft physically marked him as deviant, relegating him to the corners of the classroom and rendering him the target of playground bullies. As a protective older sister, I thought I could quell such ignorance with the force of my little fists. But I found that the stigma of cleft extended beyond the playground and pervaded continents and cultures across the globe. Indeed, in most developing countries, the cleft is considered a curse by God. In Ghana, particularly, the cleft child is thought to be the progeny of the river gods. Taken from his mother at birth, he is

slaughtered in front of the village as a sacrifice to the gods. Here, cleft is not a mark of Satan, but a seal of imminent death.

From across the dinner table, I looked at Spencer, smiling. I saw my little brother, not this doomed Other. How could someone else see him like that? I wanted to find out. This July, I traveled to Kumasi, Ghana to learn more about the stigma of the cleft in the developing world, and to attempt to dispel such insidious ignorance. Along the way, I found that the greatest ignorance I confronted was my own. Traveling to the outside of normality compelled me to contemplate life on the inside.

“Can we cut her hair?” my host brother asked, as he twined his little fingers through my hair. Kofi had never seen blond hair before, and wanted to take it to school to show his unbelieving classmates. “Leave her alone,” my host mother snapped, as she snatched the scissors from Kofi. But she stared at me for just a second too long, before returning to the kitchen. After putting Kofi to bed, she sheepishly offered to braid my hair. Lying awake at night, my braids dug into my skull as I reflected on my first week in Ghana.

I arrived at the Accra airport after an 18-hour flight, and was overwhelmed with our driver’s excitement at our arrival. Chuku quickly hustled me to his 4x4, waving away the wide-eyed taxi drivers who beckoned me into their taxis, like sirens. As we waited in traffic, with the windows down, street vendors wove precariously between the lines of cars, hawking their colorful wares of cloth, ground nuts, and electronics. As the vendors passed our window, they would point at the car excitedly, calling, “Obrani! Obrani!” Soon others amassed to peer inside the vehicle. Chuku, looked back at me anxiously, and raised the tinted windows.

As we stopped at a desolate gas station, I asked to use the restroom. From under the shade of the outbuilding, a group of Ghanaian men lounged on a pile of used tires in the heat. As I walked towards the building, they straightened their backs and smiled, showing their teeth. I scurried towards the “bathroom,” a square, roofless building with concrete walls and a sewer drain in the floor. I accidentally peed on my shoe, but had no toilet paper or sink to clean it. Walking back to the car, the men shouted at me. “Welcome Obrani!” I didn’t feel so welcome. And again, this name. I locked the car.

We continued driving towards Kumasi, on a road that was more pot hole than road. The countryside was strewn with the skeletons of half-built houses, farmland, and under-fed cattle. Goats indignantly laid down in the road unintimidated by honking to Chuku’s unending frustration and my quiet amusement. This Africa was not the Africa of the Animal Kingdom. There were no manicured landscapes, strolling sidewalks, or ice cream stands. We were met with the impressive vastness of the Ghanaian landscape and the unshakable presence of poverty that seeped into the earth like rain.

Soon I grew hungry, and we stopped again at roadside shanty. Women sat under the shade of the trees, as they stirred boiling kettles of corn and plantains. Their half-naked children played in the red dirt behind them, with plastic bottles and branches. As we approached, the women rushed towards us, offering up watermelons, squash, and cocoa for purchase. As Chuku bartered with the vociferous women, I took in my surroundings.

Ahead, dirt huts stood like giant ant hills squashed by rusting tin roofs. Goat shit littered the ground, and fires burned low in huts. There was no sign of electricity or plumbing. On top of a hill, I noticed a group of young girls, garbed in the yellow and brown uniforms that marked

them as public school students. On their way down from the water pump, they looked at me curiously, shifting under the weight of the buckets balanced upon their heads. “Obrani!” they exclaimed. Plato notes that “a proper cultural education enables a person to be very quick at noticing defects and flaws in the construction or nature of things” (Plato 59). Even at such a young age, these school girls were educated in normality’s standards of who belonged and who didn’t. Just as I looked down upon Disney’s tourists, so too did these girls look down upon me. Particularly, the girl with the pink dress smiled, approaching eagerly. I took out my camera and shot a picture of the beautiful girl. She set down her bucket and came up to me, apprehensively extending her little black fingers to touch my white hand ever so gently. She peered up into my blue eyes with eyes as rich as the harvested cocoa beans. “Obrani,” she repeated. She looked at me as if I were an angel. The other two held back, one quizzical, and the other clearly untrusting. *She* looked at me as if I were an alien, a freak. “Obrani,” she quietly sneered.

Soon other school children drew near, insisting I take their picture. Upon seeing their own likeness, they would laugh and clap their hands in wonder. They had never seen a camera before, let alone a white woman. They tugged at my Nike athletic attire and laughed as they ran about in tattered rags. The elders watched from behind their fires, looking on with wrinkled brows and pursed lips. Finally, they yelled at their grandchildren in a language I could not understand, and the children reluctantly retreated.

I walked back to the vehicle, alone. Chuku handed me an entire cut up watermelon. “This is lunch —eat up, Kate!” He boarded the 4x4. With watermelon juices dripping down my chin, I waved goodbye to the school children as we drove off. “Goodbye, Obrani!” The girl in the pink dress called.

After I finished half the watermelon, I asked Chuku what Obrani meant.

“Do not listen to them, Kate,” Chuku dismissed.

“But what does it mean?” I pressed. Chuku looked at me, with sorry eyes.

“It means white foreigner.”

Here, I was not Kate, I was White Foreigner. My identity was shattered with the utterance of a name. “White foreigner? I’m not a white foreigner,” I balked. I was normal, I was on the inside. How could I be on the outside?

Chuku looked at me skeptically. I *was* on the outside. He could see it on my skin.

My skin was white, my hair was blond, and my eyes were blue. These physical manifestations of my difference made me the Other in a place where such things were rarely, if ever, seen. Through another’s perception, I became the Other, a status that is “never simply given, never just found or encountered, but *made*” (Fabian 755). I was not born normal, as I once presumed, but rather, I was deemed normal: America said so. Here, in Ghana, my skin color and my ignorance of cultural constructs barred me from the comforting embrace of normality and left me in the uncomfortable position of the outsider. I learned that normality takes up different guises across continents. In each place, normality demands cultural conformity.

I wanted to conform.

After my night of reflection, I woke the next day with my hair in tight braids. My host sister beckoned me to get ready before the cockerel’s crow, a sign that it was *really* early. I

looked out from my open window: in between the metal bars, the night sky was still hung with stars. I had never seen so many before. I had also never lived in a home caged by bars. But my host father, as a plastic surgeon, was one of the city's few "Big Men" and burglary was not uncommon. The apartment building was surrounded by 12 foot walls covered in barbed wire, and there was a watchman who guarded the gate at night. I could make out his looming figure in the darkness.

I emerged from my room, with the expectation of an ambush of hugs and tugging hands from my little host siblings. Instead, I found them groggily trying to sit straight on the living room couch. "It's time for morning bible study," my host father explained, as I wiped the sleep from my eyes. He, along with the other eight members of my family, held bibles in their hands as we sat in a circle about the living room. Dr. Obiri began the study with a song, which everyone else knew by heart. It was a low repetitive rhythm sung in Twi that sounded like the churning waves of the coast. I mumbled along like I normally did with the radio. Dr. Obiri then beckoned us to open our bibles to Revelations. He began reading aloud, but then paused, remembering that I was unaware of how their bible study worked. He explained that we would each read a passage, and then analyze it. I was delighted to find that at 5 am in Africa I could practice my English major skills.

Following an hour of morning bible study, we put on our Sunday best for church. Earlier that week, I had gone out and bought a red dress that was similar to the dresses of my affluent host sisters. Donning my red dress, I felt thoroughly Ghanaian and was cheered by the thought that now I would blend in. Dr. Obiri complimented my dress, as he caught me looking about the kitchen, hungrily. "Ah, we do not eat breakfast before church, Auntie Kate," he playfully chided. Upon seeing my disappointed face, he laughed. "Cheer up! Church will be quite an experience

for you.” After trying to bathe last night with a water bottle and a flashlight, as both the water and the electricity had gone out, I had already had my fill of “experiences” for the moment. But Dr. Obiri wasn’t kidding.

As we walked into church, I stiffened. Unlike the quaint Lutheran church I grew up in, this chaotic Pentecostal church was the size of an airplane hangar with two stories and a massive stage. Upon the stage, 20 performers sang their own tune in to booming microphones, seemingly unaware of their fellow musicians. There was no air conditioning. Instead, the windows were open and the heat was heavy. Everyone was garbed in heavy swathes of white and blue, the customary color of the Pentecostals. Looking down at my red dress, I was embarrassed. But then I noticed my skin color, and was mortified. I had forgotten I was white. As I looked about the congregation of 3,000 dancing bodies, I was the only white one.

As offerings were called, my host sister pushed a bill into my hand and me into the aisle. As I walked between the rows, I became painfully aware of the congregation’s stares. A child in the balcony called down to me, “Ching-chong, ching-chong!” The only white people most Ghanaians ever see are the migrant Chinese workers who build the roads. This child lumped me in the same category as a Chinese man; regardless of race, heritage, or culture, we were the Obranis, the Others. I placed my offering into the basket and retreated back to my seat.

The next four, yes *four*, hours were spent standing, sitting, singing, and dancing. I had absolutely no idea what was going on. As the entirety of the service was performed in Twi, I could not understand the directives of the pastors, the hymns of the choir, or the animated conversation buzzing about me. As this was a Pentecostal service, I was unaware of the religious rites that repeated themselves like a chant. While an apparent outsider, I also felt a sense of

belonging, lost among the dancing and the heat. I made an effort to pretend to know what I was doing, parroting my host sister, as I took in the experience unfolding about me. My Lutheran Church, with the Lord's Prayer, the kneeling, and the communion, seemed like a sleeping body compared to the writhing, gyrating Church of the Pentecostals. One woman started stomping and screaming in ecstasy. I thought she had a seizure, but apparently she was overtaken by the Holy Spirit. I was overtaken by hunger, heat, and dehydration. As I sat in prayer, I nodded off. I drooled on to my leg and woke, quickly righting myself. I hoped that my father, one of the church elders, had not noticed. As the service concluded, my host mother handed me a bottle of water, and introduced me to several people who seemed either eager or apprehensive to meet the White Foreigner. I tried practicing the little Twi I had learned from my host sister, a piecemeal language lesson that was learnt in the kitchen and waiting in Kumasi's impenetrable traffic.

“Obrani, etay seng?” *White Foreigner, how are you?* asked the man.

“Ayay,” *Okay*, I replied. Having forgotten the rest of what Sara had taught me, I simply smiled. The man clapped his hands in amusement, as if I were some marvelous circus act. Everyone laughed, and continued speaking Twi with my host father. As I stood in dumb silence, I inwardly reprimanded myself: my dress, my religion, my language, my skin, these things that defined me, they were all wrong despite my efforts at conforming. I was immersed in a culture that denied my normality, or attempts at normality. And this is what travel brochures don't advertise. Complete immersion also entails absolute disconnection. Immersed in a culture so foreign from my own, I had no ties to my home, my culture, my religion, my way of life. Without these constructs, my identity as Kate fell apart.

I became the White Foreigner and I hated it.

But there was a benefit to being the White Foreigner. Everyone presumed I was a doctor. Attending work with Dr. Obiri, I passed into the hospital's operating room without question. I was handed scrubs, a facemask, and a hairnet and in such a costume, one could almost confuse me for any of the staff who scurried about the ward. I almost blended in, and I reveled in this sense of belonging. The only thing exposed was my blue eyes.

With them, I saw countless cleft children laid out upon the operating table, limp from anesthesia. So, too did I see my little brother there, laying upon a similar table in a different time and place. At the head of the table stood my host father, composed amidst the chaos of the operating room. With precise strokes, he sewed together the clefts of these impoverished children, like a village woman mending a torn cloth. With deft hands and 45 minutes, Dr. Obiri gave a cleft child a new smile and a new life. Afterwards, I met with the mothers of cleft children, who cried tears of joy as they looked down at the sleeping child in their arms. The free cleft surgery, funded by the Smile Train and performed by the Komfo Anokye Hospital staff, was a miracle that most Ghanaians didn't know existed. It is these surgeries that are dispelling the ignorance clouding the cleft in Ghana.

Beyond this ignorance of cleft, my own ignorance of normality began to surface, as I contemplated normality on an economic, as well as cultural, level. For these women, the corrective surgery may be free, but the transportation to the surgery was not. This was an expense they had accrued over months, and having thus expended their savings on transportation costs, mothers could not afford hotel costs. They often slept outside the hospital on sidewalks

and cardboard boxes. As I walked over sleeping bodies on my way to work with Dr. Obiri, I could never imagine my mother lying among them.

Perhaps most striking was this direct disparity in Ghana, between a Ghanaian King and one of his subjects. Through a surprising circumstance, I was invited to meet with the Asante King of Ghana, one of the Kumasi Cleft Foundation's largest donors. My host father had bought me a business professional dress, in the Western style, and having borrowed my host sister's high heels, I strode into the King's court behind our procession. Clothed in our western attire, we sat along one wall of his rectangular court, a room reminiscent of the Ritz's Lobby. The floor was white marble and the chandelier threw light across the walls covered in portraits and diplomas. Across from our party sat the tribal chiefs, garbed in their ritual dress, but also sporting Rolexes and iPhones. We stood as the King entered and sat upon his golden throne. His throne was bookended by two massive ivory tusks, and his hands were covered in golden rings the size of golf balls. His feet rested upon a ceremonial stool, to ensure that his bare foot would never touch the ground.

Later that day, I met Kwadwo, who ran barefoot in the gold mining village where he and his mother worked. Kwadwo lived in a mud hut smaller than the king's bathroom, and we sat on their only furniture, two wooden benches. He was one of Dr. Obiri's cleft patients. At ten years old, he could count to ten and write his name in the dirt; such was the extent of his learning. Despite having received the corrective cleft surgery, the stigma of the cleft barred him from attending free public school. If you are born physically defective, the belief is that you are mentally defective, a stigma that is neither true nor fair. Kwadwo lived with his unloving mother who tried leaving him in the hospitable upon finding that her newborn son had a cleft lip. As I asked him questions, via our translator, he would look at me shyly, unwilling to answer. When I

finally asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up, he looked at me for a moment and responded, “Doctor. I want to be a doctor.” This dream is quite possible for an American child. For Kwadwo, this dream was impossible. For Kwadwo, normality would never involve education or a life of luxury. Unlike my brother, he would never attend a university, and unlike the king, he would never wear golden rings. Working within the mines, Kwadwo would hold gold flecks in the palm of his hand, but never wear them on his finger.

I could only stand and assess this juxtaposition of normalities between my brother, King Tutu, and Kwadwo from the position of an outsider. Just as I was in Disney, here too I was a spectator, observing the extent of cultural disparity and economic inequality between their Ghana and my America. Particularly, this “unequitable distribution of social goods — income, wealth, education, health, jobs, respect, and so on” was as blatant as slap in the face (Schwable 775). I came to understand that my concept of normality was defined not only by cultural constructs, but also by economic privilege. Looking at my normality, I grew sick. I was sick with the poverty that I saw in Ghana, but also the gluttony and consumerism that I saw in my world. I hated Ghana for making me see how much we Americans bought, used, and wasted in search of happiness. Gold and diamond rings could never make me happy now, having met children, like Kwadwo, who mined them. Money didn’t buy happiness —if it did, most Ghanaians could never afford it. With my outsider’s eyes, Ghana revealed to me how my vision of home was soiled. Normality was tainted.

After a month in Ghana, I went back to the place I called home.

Disembarking in JFK airport, I was surrounded by bodies of black, white, yellow, and brown skin, dressed in a spectrum of styles, speaking in a diversity of languages. Once again, I belonged. But I could never belong as I did before. As Lewis Carroll put it, “I can’t go back to yesterday – because I was a different person then.” I, too, was a different person. I saw the world through a glass tinted with the red dirt of Kumasi. The shiny duty-free shops, fast food courts, the newsstands covered in magazines, all seemed so artificial, so gluttonous. But they were accepted as part of the landscape; this was normal, to them. But to me, normality was not as it used to be, sitting atop my father’s shoulders. Normality had been blown away like pixie dust and now, I was forced to look up at the world and see that it needed to change, both for my brother’s sake, and also for Kwadwo’s. Before I could change world, I had to change myself, and particularly how I perceived normality. I had to go out and be the Other, because in becoming the White Foreigner, I became a better Kate.

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