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I AM MUZUNGU

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I AM MUZUNGU



Julia Blanchard

John Carroll University

Senior Honors Project

Spring 2014

This Senior Honors Project, **I Am Muzungu**, has been approved.

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Introduction

We sat around the small room in a circle of assorted couches and chairs. I knew many of the people around me, but we had never been together in this context before: as travelling companions in preparation for our upcoming immersion trip to Uganda. We went around the room, introducing ourselves, sharing anything the others should know, and explaining why we chose to come on this trip.

“Hi,” I said when my turn came. “I’m Julia, and one of the first things you should probably know about me is that I’m obsessed with stories.”

I didn’t know it yet, but my interest in stories—my way of seeing the world and people as stories needing to be told—would greatly shape my experience in Uganda. In turn, too, my experience in Uganda would shape the way I look at and tell stories. This collection is the result of that crossroads.

If you would prefer to jump ahead to the stories and skip the introduction for now, I will not be offended. The purpose of this introduction (which I hope you will want to return to later) is to contextualize the following stories within my own intellectual and emotional journey as well as within the genre of travel writing. I will explore some trends within travel writing, as well as some of the ethical and artistic challenges of the genre. I will describe how I approached these challenges, and by the end of the collection, I seek to have overcome (or at least confronted) some of them.

Choosing a Genre

I initially imagined this as a collection of fiction. Or, at least, a collection of somewhat-fictionalized accounts of the people I would meet in Uganda. I pictured myself going to Uganda,

meeting dozens of people, learning their stories, and relating these stories back to people in the United States. I saw myself as an ambassador, bringing the truth back to my more-naïve family and friends. I would use my writing to illuminate the world, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and stereotype. I did not know yet what precise form my writing would take, but I planned to focus on the people of Uganda and the country itself. When I got to Uganda, however, my ideas began to change. First, I did not interact closely with many Ugandans. Due to our extensive traveling and our varying daily agenda, I did not get to talk with very many people more than once. Second, I spent multiple days in bed with a 104° fever and diarrhea. Third, I realized that my image of myself as an ambassador able to bring a crystal-clear picture of Uganda back to the United States was simultaneously stupid, naive, laughable, and dangerous. As my trip moved on, I realized that the only thing I could adequately talk about was myself.

When I got home and tried to figure out how I could write about my experience, I encountered the idea of travel writing (a promising phrase), so I began to research this genre and how it has been used throughout history. I discovered that I was not the first to turn to self-narrative when disappointed with a trip's tangible outcomes. In 1595, Sir Walter Raleigh set out on an expedition to discover El Dorado. When he returned to England without finding the fabled city, he decided to frame his written adventure as “the gracious construction of a painful pilgrimage” (qtd. in Thompson 106). Raleigh deftly re-focuses the attention of his readers from factual information (what contemporary readers were used to finding in travel writing) toward personal transformation, legitimizing his trip not in the treasures and new knowledge of the world he was expected to bring back, but in the spiritual growth of himself and his fellow travelers. His inability to arrive home with “any really significant new discoveries about the region produces what Neil Whitehead terms a ‘drive to narrativity’ in his account of the

expedition,” and so Raleigh used these dramatic stories of his hardships in an attempt to impress his queen, Elizabeth I (qtd. in Thompson 106).

I was not trying to impress anyone in the way Raleigh was, but the familiarity of his story did comfort me. Once I decided to forgo fiction as a means to write about my time in Uganda, I settled on travel writing, an ambiguous but hopeful-sounding phrase that felt important enough to toss out to family and friends. My first task was to figure out what “travel writing” actually meant.

Defining Travel Writing

Although travel writing has been around since almost the beginning of writing itself, there is still no generally agreed-upon definition of the genre. Some critics, such as Jan Borm, use a broad, all-encompassing definition of travel writing, and so include any kind of text, fictional or non-fictional, whose main theme is travel (Thompson 23). Some, like Zweder von Martels, expand the definition even further to include guidebooks, itineraries, routes and even maps into the genre (23). While these inclusive definitions would welcome just about any form of writing, other scholars such as Paul Fussell only include first-person non-fiction memoirs regarding a journey on which the author embarked (14). Fussell would not include poetry, fictionalized accounts, or more informational resources such as maps or travel guides. This debate over genre is further complicated by the various definitions of travel itself. While some scholars and writers believe that a trip across town could count as travel, others would require a much farther destination.

As there is no consensus on the definition of travel or travel writing, I decided to classify my work under my favorite definition of travel writing: the one proposed by Carl Thompson.

Thompson posits that travel “involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space” and that “all travel writing is at some level a record of or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed” (10).

This definition made sense to me. My trip to Uganda definitely consisted of a “movement through space,” and I encountered “otherness” there—both the “other” of Fr. Jino and Consolata, and the “other” of well showers and red dirt and monkeys in the street and no traffic lights. I was comforted by the permission to wrestle with the “negotiation between similarity and difference” I experienced there. I did not want to feel trapped into writing only about how similar Uganda is to the United States, or about how different it is.

In addition to the general ambiguity of the content of travel writing, the form and style of travel writing have also been contested. Throughout its history, the emphasis within travel writing on the self, the other, the land, etc., has varied enormously, as has the way in which this information has been conveyed: lists, journals, narratives, etc. Although there is still a wide variety of travel writing to be found today, most people would think first of the modern travel book. This kind of book, generally structured as a first-person narrative, is “usually more overtly *autobiographical*, and more self-consciously *literary*” and “readers understand that they are reading for the insights they will gain into the writer’s distinctive sensibility, and for the pleasure they will gain from an equally individual literary style” (Thompson 88). This meant that it would not seem unusual to modern readers that I had decided to focus much of my writing on my own thoughts and feelings during the trip. In this way, my chosen approach fit the contemporary style of travel writing.

Challenges of Travel Writing

Understanding the history of travel writing did not just give me a better understanding of its trends, but it also warned me of the many ways travel writing can be misleading, oversimplistic, self-aggrandizing, and imperious. I illustrate some of the most difficult challenges of travel writing below, as well as how I tried to approach these challenges.

1) Finding Good Role Models

One of the books I relied most heavily upon during my research was *Travel Writing*, an overview of the genre by Carl Thompson. One of the final chapters, entitled “Representing the Other,” particularly interested me, since I was hoping for some helpful hints or warnings as I attempted to do that very thing. Thompson reveals at the beginning of this chapter that it will have three sections: the first, focused on historical travel writing as colonial discourse; the second, focused on modern travel writing as continuing that imperialist tradition; and the third, focused on modern travel writing that tries to reclaim the genre and contest colonialist tendencies. I read through the first two sections, learning about approaches to avoid and taking careful notes in the margins: “*even when you try to oppose prejudices, you may be influenced by them more than you know,*” “*your info can help imperial enterprise anyway,*” and “*Ahhhhhhhh how do we avoid this?*” After reading faithfully through parts one and two, twenty-five pages of how *not* to represent the other, I gratefully reached part three. At first taken aback by the five short pages that made up the whole section, I read on. The section began by describing a new generation of travel writers: “individuals from formerly colonised cultures, or alternatively, by Western travellers who are the descendants of formerly subject, ‘subaltern’ peoples” (163). *Cool*, I thought, and read on about these new travel writers for four more pages. I began to panic.

Where am I? I thought. *I'm not an individual from a formerly colonized culture, and I am not the descendant of anyone who was, either. Am I allowed to say anything?* Then, finally, in the last paragraph of the chapter, came my answer:

And one might add that it is not only travel writers from obviously 'postcolonial' backgrounds whose work contributes to this project. One might cite here travelogues as varied as Hugh Brody's account of the Beaver Indians in *Maps and Dreams* (1981), Barry Lopez's account of Inuit tribespeople in *Arctic Dreams* (1986), Peter Robb's account of the Mafia's baleful presence in Italy in *Midnight in Sicily* (1996) and Daniel Everett's account of the Piraha people of Brazil in *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes* (2008). (166)

That was it. Those were the only examples of positive, anti-colonial Western travel writers in the entire book. Four examples that span twenty-seven years. One section of one paragraph, tucked at the very end of one of the last chapters in a 230-page book. And the next sentence begins with "None are without their flaws and distortions," and does not include a "but they at least..."

I felt doomed.

My abundant negative role models included such well-known historical figures as Pliny, Christopher Columbus, and James Fenimore Cooper, and my positive Western role models were four male writers I have never heard of.

Seriously, what's a girl to do?

I struggled with some serious cognitive dissonance when writing these pieces. I wanted so much, *so much*, to do a good job at describing my experience, to represent those I met in Uganda in the best, most unprejudiced way I possibly could. But when I was surrounded by so many negative role models, when the genre I was writing in had been so tainted by colonial and

imperial prejudices, I felt like there was no way to turn. I tried looking to other postcolonial scholars to help me navigate travel writing, but more often than not, I just got more advice on what *not* to do.

2) *Avoiding the Seeing-Man*

Because of my limited interaction with Ugandan people, I often felt like a pair of eyes: not doing much, not speaking much, not hearing much, just seeing. As much as other types of travel and writing have been criticized, I had not thought that just *seeing* could in any way be dangerous. Mary Louise Pratt, however, criticizes the “seeing-man,” whom she sees as “European bourgeois subjects [who] seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony,” and “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (9). Although I felt like a pair of eyes on my trip, I realized that I needed to actively avoid being a pair of “imperial eyes” who see the landscape as something to possess or use only for my own reflection. This was a significant danger with this project, because in trying to explain my personal growth in Uganda, it would be easy to make Uganda purely the landscape for my own reflection. I tried to avoid this by making myself aware of this danger and acknowledging that Uganda and the Ugandan people are far greater and more complex than simply the backdrop of these stories.

Another warning in the same realm is Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak’s caution against the danger of being a representative for the subaltern. Although the world of social justice often calls for being “a voice for the voiceless,” Spivak warns, “the staging of the world in representation...dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes,’ paternal proxies, agents of power” (279). If we try to represent the poor and marginalized, Spivak says, we can fall into the

trap of turning ourselves into the powerful heroes who can save them. Although we might want to be heroes, Spivak argues that this only worsens the power dynamic already present in society.

In light of Spivak's argument, I want to create, as Pratt encourages, a "contact zone," which "treats the relations among...travelers and 'travelees,' not in terms of separateness, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (8). I hoped to do that to a greater extent by reaching out to some of the Ugandans I had met through Facebook or email, and through conversation, learn more about them, but unfortunately it was more difficult than I had expected. I am not sure how successfully I created a contact zone in my work, but I hope that I always treat the Ugandans I write about in terms of equality and connection, not difference and disparity. I try to avoid descriptions of either inferiority or idealization.

3) Presenting the Self

As someone who swings radically back-and-forth on the pendulum of superiority and self-deprecation, I had an interesting time figuring out how to present myself in my work. At the beginning, I decided not to think about it too much and just try to express myself honestly. As frustrated as I often felt trying to maneuver a mine-ridden genre, I began to find the process quite therapeutic. It felt good to write about what confused me, what angered me, what made me happy. Apparently this is not unusual:

The crafting of travel accounts may also serve an important psychological function for their authors: the travelogue is from one perspective a medium in which travellers can reconcile what is likely to have been a welter of disparate, sometimes contradictory experiences into a single coherent narrative, thereby

persuading themselves of the essential coherence and integrity of their own identity. (Thompson 119)

I immediately identified with this. Before I even came across this passage, I would describe my trip to Uganda to my friends with a similar vocabulary: “it just didn’t feel like a coherent experience.” Through writing about the parts of my trip that did not seem to fit with each other, I could weave these “disparate, sometimes contradictory experiences” together and intertwine them with stories from my past, and suddenly pieces would fit together and look like a real story. My trip started to seem whole. And I would not have said it then, but I do believe that turning my trip into a “single coherent narrative” helped affirm me of “the essential coherence and integrity of [my] own identity.” I understood myself better—my thoughts and reactions.

This self-therapy had hidden dangers, though. I soon learned that writing mostly about myself poses just as much of an ethical dilemma as writing about others. I did not think so at first – what could be dangerous about simply reflecting on my own feelings? But the more I studied and researched, the more I realized that, if I did not take caution, my self-centered (literally) stories could be just as ignorantly stereotype-filled as ones about the Ugandan people themselves. Debbie Lisle warns that when travelers write about themselves, the selves they reveal in their writing are often “fashioned over and against a series of others who are denied the power of representing themselves” (qtd. in Thompson 119). By writing about my idea of self in Uganda, I consciously or subconsciously set myself against a series of others—the Ugandan people—who are not able to represent themselves. By defining myself in my stories and in my title as *muzungu* (a Bantu term meaning “white person”), I am claiming for myself an identity completely based in contrast. *Muzungu* does not mean “white person” in a vacuum; it means “white person who is not African.” If I learned about myself in Uganda, it was either because “I

am this that Ugandans are not” or “I am this that Ugandans also are.” I do not believe that you can discover yourself in a foreign country apart from the people you encounter. They will leave a mark on your identity, either by comparison or contrast (or both). If I am not conscious of the literary choices I make in how I describe myself, other Americans, and Ugandans, I could easily fall into the trap of saying, “Look at me, I found who I am, and it is Not A Ugandan.”

I know I have not avoided this trap completely. But I hope that by being aware of it, I was able to eliminate it from my work where possible, and criticize it within my work everywhere else. By not ignoring this issue, and by admitting honestly within my writing where I am struggling or failing, I hope that I am addressing this problem and making others aware of it.

A different way that modern writers have tried to avoid the imperialist, white savior image of self in their works is through the trope of the buffoon. Although at first this seemed irrelevant to my situation, I quickly realized that it was more applicable than I thought. Some writers, like contemporaries Redmond O’Hanlon and Tim Cahill, describe themselves as “clowns and cowards who have no desire whatsoever to get into perilous situations” (Thompson 126). On the one hand, this humorous, self-deprecating persona parodies the masculine, imperial hero figure frequently employed throughout travel writing’s history. On the other hand, however, this approach may have hidden consequences: some scholars have suggested that this focus on self as buffoon “is in part a way of disclaiming moral responsibilities and of evading awkward questions about the extent to which modern travel writers are still complicit with, and contributive to, the larger structures of power and discourse that maintain present-day global inequalities” (128). By painting oneself as an inept though harmless traveler, the writer may attempt to ignore his or her own culpability in situations of power and inequality.

By being aware of the benefits and dangers of painting oneself in this light, I hope to have dealt with it properly. I do occasionally paint myself in a somewhat self-deprecating light, but I hope that when I do this, I am actually implicating myself in issues of power and inequality, rather than exempting myself from them.

4) Representing Others

As a child, reading voraciously about other places and times, I began to see other countries as more interesting and, subsequently, as morally and culturally superior. I felt that the United States was materialistic, individualistic, and boring, and I often talked about how, when I was old enough, I would just “run away and live in Africa or something.” The rest of the world became this romantic place where countries had their priorities right, where I could live in a close-knit community and take a siesta after herding goats up the peaceful mountains and before getting ready for a tribal dance that night.

When preparing for my trip to Uganda, I felt a strange internal tug-of-war. Voices in my culture whispered, “Oh, those Africans. It’s a good thing you’re going there to help them. They really need it.” My childhood whispered back, “No! That’s not true! They’re actually way better than me. I’m sure their lives are a lot more meaningful and important than mine.”

I thought for a while that my romanticization of other cultures was a bizarre fixation unique to me. When investigating various examples of travel writing, I quickly realized that this was not true, that my bizarre fixations are often a part of larger trends. I had learned about “othering” before, the process by which people or societies distinguish other people or societies as being different, usually in a negative way, from themselves. It was a surprise, however, to read about “laudatory othering.” In this less famous process, the Other becomes a positive figure,

a romanticized caricature that seems more redeemable than the narrator's own society. This contrast with the narrator's own society is actually a telling part of the process: often in laudatory othering, the Other "chiefly serves a rhetorical function, having projected on to it attributes and values that the traveller deems missing in his or her own culture" (Thompson 151). So when someone is unsatisfied with their own culture (as I was), that person may then be tempted to take all of the things they find wanting in their own society and project them onto another society.

This phenomenon helped me better understand another mental maneuver that happens to be my biggest pet peeve in the entire world. Illustration: A Westerner, generally middle to upper class, visits a poorer country on a mission trip, comes back and says, "They had nothing, but they were *just so happy!*"

Whenever I hear people say this, I have a violent urge to scream in their face, "They are not happy because they are poor!"

And then I would clear my throat and continue. "If they seemed happier, it may have been because of a greater sense of community, or it may have been because you were guests and everyone tries to look happy when they have guests. Not having food or shelter does not make someone happier. Rich people are both happy and sad, and poor people are both happy and sad."

At first, I thought the "but they're so happy!" tendency was just a naive misunderstanding that way too many people in my acquaintance happened to fall victim to. As I realized later, however, this tendency may actually be a psychological need to explain away the pain suffered by that community, as Thompson suggests when he writes, "This romanticised image may be a means by which the hardship and suffering endured by another community or society is conveniently overlooked" (151). By focusing on the apparent happiness of that community, we

may find it easier to ignore the way that we ourselves are implicated in the structures of poverty that cause the community to live the way they are living.

Sometimes, when writing about the people I met in Uganda, I would be tempted to describe them in the most positive light I possibly could, in an attempt to battle all of the societal messages that suggest Africans are a lesser, more helpless sort of human. I would have to stop myself, forcing myself to remember that painting people in rosy colors is not going to help them. The best, most honest thing I can do is to focus on complexity, on showing the multifaceted nature of everyone I met (as far as I was able to witness it), and on my imperfect attempts to understand myself and my relations to others.

Story Time

Aware of this background of the genre of travel writing and all its complexities, I composed the following stories. They are in no way an illustration of my entire trip; they are a series of glances, of brief moments that stood out to me. I consider how some of these moments fit into the larger story of my life, and how some of these moments connected to each other. Please do not take any of these stories to be descriptive of Uganda or Ugandan people in general; they are specific, they are individual, they are incomplete. They are glimpses.

Enjoy.

FAQs

Where did you go again?

How I responded: Uganda.

How I continued if they looked like they were actually listening: We started in Kampala, the capital, then went north to the rural area of Gulu, then back to the capital.

Who did you go with?

How I responded: A group of students and faculty from John Carroll.

How I could have responded: I went with ten students (McKenzae, Claire, Betsy, Elise, Katlyn, Todd, Brad, Chrissy, Joe, and Eric) and three faculty members (Dr. Jen Ziemke, Dr. Walter Simmons, and Colonel Eric Patterson). They were all wonderful, passionate people, and sometimes I still felt completely alone.

What was it like?

How I usually responded: Um...

How I wish I would have responded: One morning, I woke up to the smell of a fart. The guys at the back of the bus started laughing, and the girls mumbled and groaned as they woke up. Then: “Hey look, guys!” We all turned toward the windows, and to our left, the dark sky had begun to glow pink. We had seen many sunsets, but this was our first sunrise.

Eight cameras materialized, alternately taking photos and video as the small pink glow blossomed into neon orange and yellow and purple while the clouds swirled the colors together. Someone got their iPod and began to play “The Circle of Life.” We all sang along off-tune as our

sleepy voices cracked, and I grinned as I stared out the streaked window at the most beautiful finger painting I had ever seen.

We continued to play “The Circle of Life” on repeat as we headed in the dawn toward our safari. I felt weak and insubstantial from three days of being sick, but I was content to finally have the energy to sit on the bus. I felt stupid for being happy about a sunrise, The Lion King, and the impending possibility of zebras. Wasn’t I only supposed to be happy (if I were truly a service-oriented person) when I was playing with little kids or helping an old woman cross a Ugandan street?

“THERE’S MORE TO SEE THAN CAN EVER BE SEEEEN,” we bellowed, “MORE TO DOOO THAN CAN EVER BE DOOOONE.”

We only had a few days left. I wanted to be home, wanted to hug my family and kiss my boyfriend and eat salad and cheese and sit on a real toilet and sleep in a real bed and hide from the burning sun and horrid bugs. But I couldn’t leave yet – I hadn’t figured out what to make of this confusing place that I had no impact on. It didn’t need me. I hadn’t expected that.

“TILL WE FIND OUR PLAAAAAAAACE ON THE PATH UNWIIIIINDIIIIING.”

For years, I had this strange notion that going to Africa would help me find my place. I could go there and live simply and read books and play with kids and solve world poverty. Whenever I got overwhelmed by the “real world,” I’d declare, “I’m just gonna go spend the rest of my life in Africa,” as if that somehow simplified things. But now that I was here, it wasn’t quite as simple as I had imagined. I didn’t fit in like I thought I would. I didn’t *like it* like I thought I would.

But for a moment, I felt connected to this place. It felt like the wrong setting for this kind of discovery – sitting on a bus, insulated by a thick window, screeching Disney lyrics. I felt like I belonged in a movie. So why was it this moment that felt so real?

What did you do there?

How I responded: Uhm. I'm not really sure. We mapped some stuff, I guess.

How I wish I would have responded: Our Ugandan guide stood in front of the one-room hair salon and held out the GPS, pressing down a button as he stared at it. After a moment, he smiled, and we continued walking. I held a stack of papers with fuzzy satellite maps of the area, and I tried to draw in buildings as we saw them on the street. Later, we would take my drawings, Elise's list of building names, and the GPS coordinates, and we would upload them onto a Wikipedia-type version of Google maps. A street that had previously only existed in reality would now exist virtually, so if a disaster would ever strike the area, locations could be easily tracked, and response efforts could be used most effectively. Our professor, Dr. Ziemke, had done important work with crisis mapping, which uses new technology to track and document crisis situations in order to better respond to them, and this was the reason for our trip and our day with this group of Ugandan crisis mappers.

We continued down the winding road. Three children stood outside as we paused in front of a group of houses. They wore faded T-shirts, and one held a yellow jerry can. I smiled at them as our guide asked a woman inside one of the houses what the names of the shops next door were. One of the kids smiled back at me curiously.

We resumed our journey down the narrow path, small reddish-brown homes leaning together in the spaces between tall trees. As we turned a corner, a group of eight or so children

sat on the side of the road. They moved toward us cautiously, giggling. One of them managed to coax a water bottle from someone in our group, and they laughed and whispered to each other as we took the GPS coordinates of the brick school squeezed between two trees. At the other end of the road, a dozen boda-bodas (their term for motorcycles) buzzed as the men sitting on top of them joked with each other, throwing us suspicious glances. I felt guilty when I saw them. I wanted to tell them that I was trying to help, that I wasn't a spy or a government agent or a nosy *muzungu*. Instead, I dropped my eyes and walked past them.

Did you like it?

How I responded: Sure. (*Clears throat.*) I think so.

How I wish I would have responded: I have no idea. Sometimes I thought I hated it. The bugs, the smelly cement holes, the bland potatoes at every meal, the permanent sweat in every crevice of my body, the lying in bed too tired to acknowledge the sinking feeling that warned of diarrhea, the feel of eyes wherever we walked, the stony look when I asked for change for the largest bill in Uganda because that's all the airport exchange woman gave me, the empty jealousy of watching the rest of my classmates fit in far more easily with the children and the people we encountered, the silent companionship of the bus window.

And sometimes, when I closed my eyes as I danced in the sun with a little girl in my arms, I thought I loved it.

What do you miss the most?

How I responded: The people, I guess.

How I wish I would have responded: Every morning in Gulu, we gathered for breakfast in a little eating room whose walls were covered with saint portraits, touristy pictures of waterfalls, and printed-out Bible verses on white posterboard. Breakfast was awful. The hard slices of bread were tasteless and stale, and I was afraid to eat the mangoes taken off the tree outside because the skin was related to poison ivy (one of my few enemies in this world). But every morning, I filled my small white mug with hot water, and stirred in two spoonfuls of Ugandan instant coffee, the mixture instantly foaming before melting into a smooth, dark liquid. I sat at the breakfast table, my eyes gazing in the distance as I gave my thoughts freedom to tumble over each other, holding my mug between my hands and sipping the rich, sweet drink.

Should I be ashamed that I miss the coffee more than anything else? I'm not sure. I am sometimes.

What were the people like?

How I responded: I didn't actually meet that many people. We travelled around a lot.

How I wish I would have responded: I want to tell you about Francisca, who invited us to her front porch under the sunset-painted sky, who looked around at her sisters and daughters and grandchildren with a wide grin. Whose husband and sons had all died, and who led her all-woman household with a ferocious love. Who pressed juicy mangoes in our hands and insisted on sending us with nuts and avocados. Who laughed and laughed as Elise held her tiny grandson, as Brad danced in circles with the neighborhood boys, as I sat on a scratchy red mat with my shoes off, trying to convince her four-year-old niece not to be afraid of me.

I want to tell you about her, but I don't know how. As soon as I start to describe her, she becomes more of a character and less of a person. I can't talk about her without taking away part of her complexity.

And I want to tell you about Daniel, an older high schooler who stared intently at the bright screen as I showed him how to use a word processor, who smelled strongly of sweat and unwashed clothes, who smiled like a boy, and shook my hand like a man.

But how can I tell you about him? How can I show you him without sweeping generalizations, without descriptions that merely glaze over who he is? Who am I to paint his portrait, with only a glance and without permission?

And I want to tell you about Consolata, a college student my age who walked with me down the streets of Gulu as we returned from mapping the houses and shops and NGOs. Consolata, who turned her beautifully round face toward me and questioned me about God, school, boyfriends. Who asked me, quite seriously, if the roads in America were paved in gold. Whose family believes in witchcraft, but who eagerly showed me all the Christian worship songs she has on her black flip phone. Who hugged me when we left, gave me her Facebook name and email, and told me she hoped to see me again – whether in Uganda or in America.

How can I tell you about her? And how can I not?

Muzungu

In the summer before sixth grade, I devoured every book written by Lurlene McDaniel. I'd head straight to the teen section of the library, where there were rows of them on a triangular purple rack by the far wall. The covers all looked the same – a boy and a girl in some tween-appropriate romantic embrace, with a vague pastel background. At the end of almost every book, either the boy or the girl had died, usually due to a complicated and rare disease, and the majority of the plot revolved around the survivor learning how to cope with the impending death of the love of their life. I was addicted.

One week, I checked out a Lurlene McDaniel book called *Angel of Mercy*. It was about a nerdy, overly optimistic girl named Heather who reminded me of me. She delayed her entrance into college to work for a few months on a Mercy Ship full of doctors and volunteers who went to countries in Africa to provide medical care. On the ship, she met and fell in love with a Scottish doctor named Ian who subsequently died in a plane crash trying to rescue a baby with a cleft palate.

I came out of the bathroom with the book, tears streaking my face, and ran into my mom, who looked concerned. I'm not sure if she was more concerned that I was crying over a book or that I had finished it in the two hours we had been home from the library, but that's another matter. She was used to both, at least.

I blubbered the story to my mom as she nodded patiently.

“I want to go to Africa,” I declared with all of the passion and resolve my eleven-year-old frame could muster. “I want to help people like Heather does.”

That moment planted a seed in my brain. I started listening to African music, wearing African jewelry, educating myself on African politics. I couldn't explain why I felt so strongly about this place – I only knew that I couldn't get Africa out from underneath my skin.

Fast-forward to my sophomore year of college. McKenzae was the first to tell me about it: "They're not sure yet," she said, "but they're talking about having an immersion trip to Uganda."

"I'm going," I said immediately. "I have to go."

Three or four months later, I sat down for my immersion interview with Fr. Jim. He had come on my previous immersion trip to Ecuador, so we knew each other well. He didn't bother looking down at the interview questions before leaning forward, furrowing his eyebrows, and asking, "Why Uganda?"

"I don't know," I said, tilting my head to one side. "I've just always been kind of obsessed with Africa. I think it started with a book I read in middle school, and then I just haven't been able to get enough. I've gotten involved with charity projects there, with political advocacy work. I love learning about the culture. I...I don't know. It's just a part of me for some reason."

Fr. Jim paused. "So what you're saying is—you want to go home."

"Yes," I said, relieved that someone finally understood me and didn't think I was crazy.

"Don't worry," he said, "we'll get you home."

I knew that Uganda wasn't going to meet my expectations. I knew I couldn't predict what a country was going to be like. But I thought I could at least predict my reactions. I had been on immersion trips before, I had been to other countries. It would be just like my trip to Ecuador: I

would get there, feel overwhelmed and confused, meet wonderful people who would love me and teach me about humanity, then I would leave feeling the joy and hope that came from making a true connection with the people there.

As I was preparing for the trip, I became obsessed with the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. The main character, Elder Price, is sent on his traditional Mormon missionary experience to Uganda (what a coincidence!) and our ridiculous enthusiasm was pretty much the same. I identified with his optimistic sense of moral and spiritual ambition. In one of my favorite parts, he sings, “Something incredible. I’ll do something incredible. I wanna be the Mormon who changed all of mankind. Something I’ve foreseen, now that I’m nineteen, I’ll do something incredible that blows God’s freaking mind!” This line is intended to be laughed at, but I secretly identified with it. And what better way—for both of us—to blow God’s mind than by going to Uganda and making a difference there?

Once in Uganda, Elder Price expresses a deep sense of solidarity and connection with the people he has met. He and his fellow elders sing, “We are Africa. We are the heartbeat of Africa. With the rhino, the meerkat, the noble Lion King...Africans are African, but we are Africa!” Again, the absurdity of these lyrics is meant to be mocked, but I found a bizarre joy and consolation in singing this song at full volume in my car. I knew that the song was joking, but I really did hope that I could find this degree of connection when I was in Uganda myself.

And so our plane took off, and I was filled with the excitement and hope of my literary predecessors. I had Elder Price’s optimism. I had Heather’s hope and resolve. And I knew that, just like them, I would be accepted and loved as if I were an African myself.

I winced as we crossed the street. All seven of us, in tank tops and T-shirts, traipsing across the dusty road in a loud, chattering pack. I could feel eyes on us from every storefront, but the others seemed oblivious. My classmates laughed and cheered as Chrissy dribbled her soccer ball down the side of the road, and my face flushed.

Everywhere: eyes. Staring from colorful mats on the ground, small plastic trinkets scattered around. Blinking from amidst heaps of pungent spices. Watching from the front step of a small unidentified store with an unrelated advertisement (Color your world: Sadolin!) painted in bright letters above the door.

This was not what I was prepared for. I thought we would be welcomed, loved—not gawked at. I wanted to sink into the red dust so I wouldn't stand out so fiercely.

We were the only white people in the expansive marketplace, and I felt it. Little kids openly stared at us, though they'd grin and wave if we smiled at them. The adults just stared.

We maneuvered through the market, dodging between wooden structures that framed wrinkled women and their spices.

“Irima bey?”

“Ofoyo!”

“Iree maber?”

“Ofooyow!”

“Areemabay!”

We only knew two greetings in Acholi, and they echoed over and over, mispronounced, in our grating American voices until the women on the ground with their spices openly laughed at us, mimicking our parrot squawks.

When we made our way back to the street—Chrissy, Joe, and Todd with shiny Uganda soccer jerseys in hand—someone suggested we take a picture.

Please no, I begged silently. Let's keep moving. We can't get any more touristy than a group picture. Can't you tell we don't belong?

Hiding near the back and behind my sunglasses, I faked a smile until the picture was taken and I could leave the eyes behind me.

In Ecuador, they had called us *gringos*. The small kids would shout it after us, and one attention-loving girl teased us by protesting that her name was Gringa.

In Uganda, it was *muzungu*. In both cases, the word refers to white people, and though it can be used derisively, it is most often neutral or affectionate. I didn't mind it as much in Ecuador, but it somehow bothered me more here. In Ecuador, I felt accepted. In Uganda, I felt alone. I didn't *want* to be *muzungu*. I wanted to belong.

We all had different ways of dealing with it.

Colonel Patterson made it a joke. When someone called him a *muzungu*, he would protest, "No, I'm Ugandan, like you!" They would look at his pale skin and laugh together.

Dr. Simmons confused people. Black-skinned and from Grenada, he insisted he was a "brother" as he tried to haggle prices at the market.

Katlyn showed off her peeling, sunburnt skin.

Dr. Ziemke just looked sad. I understood her the most.

All I wanted was to get to know the people we saw. In Ecuador, where we partnered with a well-established volunteer program in a small area, it was easy. Here, where we travelled around and were mostly on our own, I felt profoundly separated from the people. Even when we

met and talked to Ugandans, we usually never saw them after that one encounter. I couldn't connect with anyone, and I had come to believe that personal connections were the main reason for trips like this. Sometimes I felt as though I had never gotten off the bus—that I was eternally trapped in my isolation, separated from others by a thick pane of glass.

When I came back from Uganda, I didn't want to talk about it.

My friends were surprised. I usually loved to talk about my trips. "I'm still processing it," I would say as an explanation, although I'm still not sure what that was supposed to mean.

Family parties were unavoidable barrages of the question. At one, I tried to escape after answering most of the well-intentioned inquiries as quickly as I could, but my aunt cornered me behind the white wicker chairs.

"How was Uganda?" she squealed.

"Good," I tried to smile.

"Didn't you just love how the air felt?"

"Um...yeah."

"And isn't the scenery beautiful?"

"Have you been to Uganda?"

"No, Kenya. Aren't the people just so nice? And *happy*?"

"Right."

"And how about—"

"Oh, look! Dessert!"

A week later

My mom: Are you still processing?

Me: Yep.

A week later

Mom: How's the processing going?

Me: I still don't really want to talk about it.

I think the reason I couldn't talk about it was that I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, I'd lose control and scream, "I JUST WANTED AFRICA TO LOVE ME BUT IT DIDN'T."

Did Africa care that I had worn its clothing, listened to its music, read its books? Nope. Not at all. I thought I'd feel like I belonged by virtue of sheer desire. I didn't. I hadn't found the "home" that Fr. Jim promised me. Africa didn't pay me any heed, didn't even glance in my direction. It just kept turning, and I was irrelevant. Unneeded.

I wanted to be needed.

I am *muzungu*. I wanted to belong.

Two months after I had returned from Uganda, I went back to the library and checked out *Angel of Mercy*. I was amazed to realize that the country Heather and Ian worked in was Uganda. This felt right, somehow. A circle.

I read the book quickly, excited to rediscover the source of my passion. I couldn't find it.

I didn't mind that the writing was only average or the romance was cheesy. I expected that. But after learning about Uganda and visiting the country myself, I was disgusted by some of the assumptions made. The setting of *Angel of Mercy* had no connection whatsoever to the Uganda I knew. The backdrop was bland and vaguely "African." The external conflict in the country was hazy, and rebel armies were literally referred to in the narrative as "the bad guys."

The plot of the book revolved almost entirely around the white missionaries, with the Ugandan people providing a save-us-please backdrop instead of being developed characters. I was saddened and hurt that this book that had inspired so much passion in me had turned out to be incredibly one-dimensional and Eurocentric.

Should I have been surprised? Maybe not.

But please don't tell my sixth-grade self. I don't want her to know.

Phyllis

The first time we saw her was at a police station in Kampala. We were sitting in the sticky bus on a hill in the police courtyard when Fr. Jino and Debbie and Phyllis pulled up in a small car next to us. The previous summer, I met Fr. Jino, a Ugandan priest who taught for a semester at John Carroll, and Debbie, a woman from Cleveland who led a Ugandan charity organization. But none of us knew anything about Debbie's friend who would be making the trip with us.

Phyllis stepped out of the car, her cropped gray hair stiff with the hairspray she smuggled on the plane, her loose dress matching her brand new Sketchers GOwalk shoes. She shook our hands through the bus window, and then she turned around, pulled out her camera, and snapped a picture of the police station.

My heart thumped against my ribs. My nerves were frazzled already from a half-hour of sitting in the police station, praying that they wouldn't arrest our bus driver for hitting a motorcycle rider who swerved too close. When I saw what Phyllis was doing, all remaining blood drained from my face.

"Look," I hissed to McKenzae. "She's taking pictures! Do you think they saw her?"

Taking out your camera at a police station when you're already in trouble is probably not the smartest idea anywhere, but in Uganda, it's illegal to take pictures of any government buildings.

I fought the panic rising up in my throat.

"I don't think so," she said. "I think we're okay."

I exhaled. "She probably just didn't know."

“Wait, where’s Phyllis?” somebody said. We looked around, then at the bus, where she was picking her way down the steps. She waved her tablet at us as she waddled over.

The two Ugandan soldiers stared at her as she walked toward us, and I grimaced. We were parked, the bus still running, at the side of a cliffside road next to a stunning view of the Nile. We had seen signs that said photography at that spot was illegal, but when we reached the view and saw two soldiers standing guard, leaning casually on the rocks with their AK-47s slung around their necks, the bus stopped and Fr. Jino got out. A few moments later, he reappeared at the front of the bus.

“They said they will let us take a quick picture,” he said. “But they said they are hungry.”

“Oh, we have plenty,” someone said as various hands rummaged for crackers and juice.

“No,” Fr. Jino said. “In my country, this means they want money.”

So we bribed the soldiers for a few minutes at the scenic spot, and as cars drove by and watched us, Phyllis shuffled over with her tablet.

After we took a group picture and took a moment to stare at the breathtaking view, we walked over to the bridge to see where the river was flowing to. Below us, on the cliffs, was a man in shorts bathing by the side of the river. A small lean-to rested against the rocks.

I looked away, feeling rude, and focused on the rushing water.

A moment later, I turned to leave, and Phyllis had turned her tablet toward the homeless man and was taking pictures. My eyes grew wide, feeling horrible for the man whose privacy had been violated by Phyllis’s curiosity. I glared at Phyllis, furious that her monstrous tablet made our group look like a bunch of rich, picture-snapping tourists.

I’m sorry, I sent telepathically to the man in the river.

One day, Fr. Jino joined us in the middle of the bus, and we took advantage of his good nature by bombarding him with questions.

“How old are you, Fr. Jino?” Elise asked at one point.

“Older than you think,” he grinned, and told us to guess. We guessed mid-30s.

“Forty-two,” he said.

“Seriously?” Katlyn exclaimed.

“Ugandans age really well,” Joe said. A few seats forward, Phyllis turned around.

“It must be the stress-free life,” she commented.

Silence fell.

Fr. Jino leaned forward. “Stress-free? What do you mean, stress-free?”

We all cringed in our seats. *Had she not even Wikipedia-ed the country she was going to? Did she not know about the wars, the death, the fear, the corruption, the blood?*

Phyllis just looked at him and turned back around.

There were so many times we got frustrated with Phyllis. There was the time she walked onto the altar as Mass was beginning and took pictures of Fr. Jino because she had helped pay for his stole. There was the time she asked Moses, who had been a child soldier in the Lord’s Resistance Army, why all of his siblings weren’t abducted with him. And there was the time when even though every restaurant we had been to for a week only had Coke, she asked if they had Coke Zero and was mad when they didn’t. She never engaged the people we met in conversation, instead grabbing at her tablet and taking pictures in every direction.

Eventually, Dr. Ziemke had to pull her aside and ask her to stop taking pictures. It was a group expectation, she said, that we would be sensitive to the situation and only take pictures if

we had developed meaningful relationships with the people we had met. Phyllis begrudgingly agreed, and a few times Fr. Jino exemplified sacrificial love by staying back with Phyllis while we went somewhere, so that we wouldn't have to be embarrassed by her.

When I went to Paris in high school, the first thing I packed was a scarf and a hat. Well, actually, multiple scarves and hats. In addition, I Googled fashion trends in France to see what people wore and know how I could best fit in.

I'm NOT going to look like a tourist, I resolved.

At Versailles and the Louvre, of course, I pulled out my camera and took miles of pictures. But in the evening, when my friends and I were walking the cobbled streets of Paris by ourselves, I tilted my hat, adjusted my scarf, made sure my under-the-shirt travel purse was hidden, and tried to walk like the bustling people around me. Maybe if I didn't talk, maybe if I stopped staring wide-eyed at Notre Dame when we walked by, maybe if I tried *really hard*, someone will think that I'm French.

I'm not sure why I have always cared so much about not looking like a tourist. I guessed that I just always wanted to fit in. But when I was reading one day, I found another answer:

It has also been suggested that a strenuous insistence on one's own status as 'traveller' rather than 'tourist' is sometimes a psychological defence mechanism against so-called 'tourist angst', which is the unsettling realisation that one is oneself merely engaged in a form of tourism....Thus writers frequently adopt an anti-touristic rhetoric that lampoons and/or laments the activities of other travellers, thereby setting themselves apart from, and superior to, those others.¹

"I totally do this," I wrote in the margins. Oops.

¹ Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, (New York: Routledge, 2011) 123-124.

I wanted to be better than Phyllis. I wanted to be more informed, more sensitive, more responsible. I wanted Ugandan people to look at me and think, “Wow, she’s really cool. She’s not annoying or arrogant at all.”

But when I thought about it more, wasn’t my superiority more inappropriate than Phyllis’s naiveté? Just because I studied Ugandan politics for a semester didn’t mean I could understand where these people came from. My “tourist angst” made me feel better about my own lack of knowledge, because at least I knew more than Phyllis. She was comfortable with who she was; I tried to change myself and deny my own identity as a foreigner. Which was worse?

If you figure it out, please let me know.

Out of the Bus Window

Red hills

A lot of green plants

Red roofs

Yellow jerry cans lined up beneath the stoop of a store

Old men sitting silently on steps

Red dust coating every green blade and leaf along the road

Yellow jerry cans standing at attention along the path to a small well

I've always wondered where those come from. Why jerry cans?

Abandoned brick buildings without roofs, tall grasses spilling out of their empty insides

Tangles of bright green plants morphing into other tangles of bright green plants

Painted advertisements above small stores for Fortune cooking oil in yellow cans

So that's where they all came from

Red mud puddles in ruts on the road

Buy Fortune, Build Uganda!

Women in gomesi, traditional dresses with puffed sleeves, baskets atop a cloth on their heads,
their children trailing behind

Mud huts set against a purple sunrise

Perfect rows of carefully planted pine trees

A tiny boy struggling to drag a jerry can behind him on the grass

Malaria-ridden mosquitoes attacking the windows in droves

Rows and rows of pine trees

Two men on the back of a motorcycle

NGOs with chain-link fences and large signs announcing their presence

Soldiers sitting under trees against the US embassy's fence, their AK-47s propped up against
them

Three people on the back of a motorcycle

Oh, right, they call them boda-bodas

"Fruit of Faith" on the mud flap of a diesel truck

On the front of another truck: "Easy Drinking Club"

Backpack-laden students walking together to Makerere University

Spelling mistakes everywhere

Glimpses between city streets of slums: cardboard and corrugated metal roofs almost
overlapping in their proximity

A tall glass building, empty except for the bottom floor, peering over the crowded street

Someone said President Museveni's wife owns that

Better. Simple. Life.

"Grory to God" on the side of a taxi bus

Hundreds of people on hundreds of boda-bodas, squeezing through solid lanes of taxis and buses,
flowing through traffic like water through stones

White mannequins hanging from every storefront

Why are there no black mannequins?

A truck full of soldiers driving toward the protest at the *Daily Monitor*

A sign: "Action for Disadvantaged People"

The sun setting behind the Uganda National Mosque

Little kids with ripped clothes selling sticks of meat on the side of the road

Wealth is waiting for you. Crane Bank.

Pine trees

Red dirt

Rain

The Wall

At first, relief.

It was still a hole in the ground, but it was porcelain and actually had a flusher.

High class, Gulu U, I thought with appreciation.

I hiked up my skirt and went to squat when I saw it lurking there. I stifled a scream as its eyes stared straight at me. It clung possessively to the side of the hole, its bright green skin a (quite effective) neon warning sign.

“Um...Claire?” I squawked, trying to hide my irrational panic.

“Yeah?” she responded from the other side of the wooden stall door.

“There’s a lizard in here.”

“Do you want me to go first?”

“It’s...it’s just sitting in the hole.”

“Do you want me to go first?”

“Yeah,” I said, letting my skirt fall as I stumbled out the door.

I let Claire selflessly go in as I waited outside, listening to my classmates talk (and flirt) with the Ugandan students we were partnering with for our mapping day at Gulu University.

I heard a flush, and Claire appeared at the door.

“It’s still there,” she said.

“What?”

“I flushed and...it’s still there.”

I gulped and went inside.

I squatted, trying both to avoid eye contact with the lizard and to make sure I knew its location. As I went, it broke from its trance and began to move. I froze, panicked, until I realized that it couldn't get out. The curvature was too steep.

Poor little guy, I thought, wondering how long he had been stuck in there. *Poor huge fat slimy ugly little guy*.

Shuddering, I stood up, reached over, and pulled the chain.

I didn't want to watch, but I did. As the water swirled down, the lizard struggled, flailing harder and harder until his grip was lost completely and he was gone. I'd never killed anything larger than a spider before. I felt legitimately traumatized.

"I killed the lizard," I moaned to Claire as I stepped out. She laughed and then consoled me as we walked across the red dirt back to our group.

I thought I had mentally prepared myself for the inconveniences the trip would entail, but the toilets still shocked me. I hadn't expected thrones or anything – I knew better than that. I even anticipated maybe having to go out in the open in some places, but Dr. Ziemke had reassured us that the places we stayed would have toilets.

I just didn't expect that "toilet" would mean "cement hole in the ground."

I didn't even mind the squatting all that much – although it becomes rather difficult when you

- a) are a girl
- b) are wearing long pants
- c) are on your period
- d) have to aim into a really small hole or

e) all of the above.

No, that was all uncomfortable but manageable. What really got me were the bugs.

They were everywhere. Flies coated the walls during the day, spiders and cockroaches midnight arrivals to the party. I had a perpetual fear of bugs flying up my butt, so I developed the habit of using one hand to swat away flies near the opening in the floor while my other hand—white knuckles planted in a tiny, fly-less patch of wall—kept me balanced.

Two of the girls had brought headlamps, and we shared them when we needed to use the bathrooms at night. We would walk back to the row of cement stalls, leaving the doors open so the one overhead light would shine through, and we'd pass a roll of toilet paper back and forth. And sometimes, if we knew the boys were inside, we would ditch the party with the bugs and just go in the grass.

On our way back to Kampala at the end of our two weeks, we stopped for a bathroom break at a gas station. After grabbing two rolls of toilet paper, we filed off the bus. I took up the back of the line, following the group across a thin sidewalk that ran next to some kind of tracks three feet below the ground.

The bathroom was in the backyard. A series of stairs led to a bizarre configuration perching on top of a hill. The boys' side was a ceiling-less half-wall at the bottom of the hill, and the girls' side balanced at the top, a fat stone room that looked like one of those grave-houses in really old cemeteries. When it was my turn, Dr. Ziemke handed me the roll of toilet paper, and I mounted the stairs. Opening the creaky door, I was amused to notice little footrests on either side of the hole (in case, like me, you still hadn't quite mastered the skill of how wide a stance to

take). As I struggled to balance my purse over my shoulder, I admired the walls. They were painted in a clever gradient – black at the bottom, leading up to white at the top.

And then the black paint shifted.

I had seen flies in a stall before (every single day for the past two weeks), but never this many. This was a wall of flies. A moving, twitching, black wall. I closed my eyes and went as fast as I could, knowing already that this image would haunt me months later.

The issue of sanitation was one of the reasons I wanted to come to Uganda in the first place. When I was in high school, some of my friends and I started a group to raise money to build wells and toilets and sanitation stations in countries like Uganda. Through years of researching global water and sanitation issues, I wanted to finally see it for myself. I wanted to see the wells, to see the yellow jerry cans that many people worldwide transport their water in. I wanted to see the toilets. And now that I had seen them, I didn't know what to do.

I knew that you didn't have to *like* being in solidarity, but I surprised myself with the extent to which I hated it. I honestly wasn't sure if I could handle living like that for more than a few weeks. I had been considering applying for post-grad service programs in Africa, but I was seriously thinking about ruling them out just because I hated the toilets so much. If I were too weak to handle the smaller inconveniences of cement holes and bugs, how could I ever relate in any meaningful way to people who had far bigger things to worry about? I felt silly and spoiled and ashamed.

When people at home asked me if I wanted to go back to Uganda, images of the toilets would flash through my head. I would try not to shudder. "I don't know," I'd mumble. *I don't want to go back. I don't deserve to go back. I'm too selfish.*

Sometimes I still think about those toilets. I sit on a smooth porcelain rim and wonder how much I disgraced myself with my aversion. I think about Elise and Claire, who still chose the cement holes after we found a secret hidden toilet on the other side of the retreat house. I think about my shame. I think about the bugs. And I wonder what, if anything, I could do to redeem myself if I ever go back.

Questions of “Questions of Travel”

Questions of Travel

Elizabeth Bishop

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,
turning to waterfalls under our¹ very eyes.²
--For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,
aren't waterfalls yet,
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,
they probably will be.
But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,³
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,
slime-hung and barnacled.

Think of the long trip home.⁴
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?⁵
Where should we be today?⁶
Is it right to be watching strangers⁷ in a play
in this strangest of theatres?⁸

¹Not that the traveler here says “our.” To whom is she referring? A companion? Fellow observers? The readers? Can one ever travel alone, or is there always some other?

² When we went through the National Park on our way back to the capital, we stopped to hike to Murchison Falls, what we had mistakenly thought of as one of the seven wonders of the world because we Googled it wrong and saw Victoria Falls. This was day three of my relationship with a 104° fever, and I pictured myself tumbling over the side as we hiked down the trail. I stayed back with Betsy, and we sat in the shade of the visitor's shelter, watching the river rush by us on its way to its drop and listening to a group of Canadians talk about eating lunch. We watched the waterfalls spill over the sides in soft slow-motion on the phones of our triumphant returning friends.

³ What could the streams and clouds tell us of what they've seen?

⁴ It took over twenty-four hours to get home. Due to my superpower of falling asleep anywhere in any position, I slept almost the entire way home. It made leaving a little less complicated in my head.

⁵ Should we? Would it have been better to send \$3000 to Fr. Jino to use for his school? Would it have been better to spend the two weeks in downtown Cleveland, hanging out under bridges with our self-named friend “Hobo Joe” and other homeless men? Would it have been better to watch *The Last King of Scotland* and just imagine what Uganda is like now?

⁶ Will the answer change tomorrow?

⁷ When do they become more than strangers? Can they?

⁸ While the rest of the group sat at the back of the bus and laughed with each other, I was glued to the window seat and stared, for hours, as the scenery would grow and melt and change as we drove. Sometimes, when we passed through villages, I would smile and wave at the little kids by the road or the

What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life
in our bodies, we are determined to rush
to see the sun the other way around?
The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?
To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,
inexplicable and impenetrable,
at any view,
instantly seen and always, always delightful?⁹
Oh, must we dream our dreams
and have them, too?¹⁰
And have we room
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?¹¹

But surely it would have been a pity
not to have seen the trees along this road,
really exaggerated in their beauty,
not to have seen them gesturing
like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.
--Not to have had to stop for gas¹² and heard
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune
of disparate wooden clogs¹³
carelessly clacking over
a grease-stained filling-station floor.
(In another country the clogs would all be tested.

old men sitting on the steps of their store, and they would grin back, the kids sometimes running with the bus for a few moments. Sometimes I would just stare, watching a movie pan out in front of me, seeing buildings and trees and faces flash by me. I was a stranger, watching, watching.

⁹ What motivates my travel? Do I want to see a hummingbird or stonework, or do I want to see people? If I want to see things, I think I can more easily justify travel. There are things across the world that aren't nearby. But if I want to meet people, like I like to think I do, then how are they any different than people next door? If we like to claim that people everywhere have the same feelings and desires and fears, then why do we need to traipse across the world to figure this out for ourselves? Maybe people are different, a little bit, across the world. Maybe they have different stories to tell.

¹⁰ What if the world isn't quite what we dreamed it would be?

¹¹ Can we fold our experiences up into small, bite-sized memories? Can we fold up a sunset?

¹² We stopped for gas at Africa Gas Station. I couldn't decide if this name were a nod toward tourists and our fixation on thinking Africa is one coherent place, or if the name made sense to the people there.

¹³ I stared at people's shoes wherever we went. As I was packing, I had a very hard time deciding what shoes to wear. I needed something that looked okay with long skirts, but that had support and durability, and also didn't make me look like a tourist. I Google searched "Ugandan shoes" to try to figure out what people there actually wore, but I didn't get much help. I ended up with a pair of Toms and expensive hiking sandals from Gander Mountain. I don't remember now what most people wore for shoes, but I remember some flip flops and some bare feet. I don't think they were as concerned about support and durability as we were.

Each pair there would have identical pitch.)
--A pity not to have heard
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird
who sings above the broken gasoline pump
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:
three towers, five silver crosses.¹⁴
--Yes, a pity not to have pondered,
blurr'dly and inconclusively,
on what connection can exist for centuries
between the crudest wooden footwear
and, careful and finicky,
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.
--Never to have studied history in
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.
--And never to have had to listen to rain¹⁵
so much like politicians' speeches:
two hours of unrelenting oratory
and then a sudden golden silence
in which the traveller¹⁶ takes a notebook, writes:¹⁷

"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places,¹⁸ not just stay at home?
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right

¹⁴ One of the churches we visited had a giant white Jesus on a giant white cross. Bleach white, ghost white. When Dr. Ziemke had been there the year before, she asked the priests about it. "Why do you have a white Jesus?" she said. They laughed and told her it was fine, not to worry about it. "Jesus has no color," they told her.

¹⁵ On our first night in Gulu, it rained. Heavy rain, and one by one we stripped off our shoes, pranced in the mud, and shampooed our hair under gushing gutters. Dancing in the rain in Africa. Are we allowed these stereotypical experiences, or should we resist them?

¹⁶ As I drove down to a play with my old high school drama director, we talked about her trip to Ireland with her sisters. "They're tourists, not travelers," she said. I made an "I know what that's like" sound in my throat. I want to be a traveler, not a tourist. But what is the difference? Level of education? Level of arrogance?

¹⁷ In a sudden golden silence, I take my notebook, write: "I am sitting on a concrete sidewalk with a beautiful patch of orange flowers in front of me, and behind the wall, I can see the sunset between the trees. I sat down here to journal, and I was a little unsettled thinking about what I'm going to do next year. Almost as soon as I sat down, I heard the sisters [the group of nuns we were staying with] begin to sing, and it almost made me cry, it was so beautiful. I sat here and listened to them sing, and I prayed with them. I felt this peace come over me. I don't know if that means I'm supposed to be here next year, but I think it means I'm supposed to be here right now."

¹⁸ Can we visit a place and see only what we imagined we'd see? How can we be sure we're seeing what's real?

about just sitting quietly in one's room?¹⁹

Continent, city, country, society:²⁰

the choice is never wide and never free.²¹

And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,²²

wherever that may be?"²³

¹⁹ I'm too impatient to sit quietly in my room. But this curiosity could just as easily be harmful as good. So many of the world's problems stem from people who couldn't sit quietly in their rooms. But this curiosity also spurred a lot of good things...right?

²⁰ What is the difference between these? Why can a student come into the Writing Center with a paper that begins, "I have chosen to research the country of Africa"?

²¹ Why is our choice neither wide nor free? Do we not have the whole world? What holds us back?

²² Being in Uganda was the first time I appreciated America. I'd always been a flippant, "Oh, America is boring" person, wanting to be completely immersed in the culture and history and tradition of somewhere else, anywhere else. Being in Uganda made me want to be home. I wanted paved roads, libraries, billboards with significantly fewer misspellings, my family, the food. Mostly the food. "I'm not American," I'd say, trying to impress myself and my English professors. "I'm a cosmopolite." Being in Uganda made me want to be home.

²³ I was ready to leave. And then the plane began to move, and I impulsively gripped the arms of my chair, closing my eyes and feeling how the chair was connected to the floor was connected to the plane was connected to the wheels was connected to the ground and how I was one with the ground and one with the soil and how the only possible way I wasn't going to start crying was to promise myself over and over and over that I would be back. Why did I feel so connected with this place? It wasn't home. I was going home. Was I?

The Speakers Will Play American Music After You Leave

The bus bounced its way down the dirt road, a dull speck amid the vivid color surrounding us. We hit a particularly large bump, and my brain thwacked against my already-throbbing skull. My classmates chattered in the seats behind me, but my eyes were transfixed on the window. I didn't want to miss a thing. It didn't matter that the landscape barely changed – each new tree and shade of green enthralled me. Each abandoned concrete building, each line of storefronts, each well lined with jerry cans had a story, I was sure of it, and, by staring as hard as I could out the window, I thought maybe I could extract part of that story.

As I became almost dizzy trying to take in every clump of bright red clay and patch of blue sky, the bus turned and we drove down a dirt road I hadn't seen a moment ago. We became engulfed in green as the grass and trees squeezed in on us. My heart quivered a little. I had been looking forward to this day – a village celebration in honor of Moses's graduation from Kampala University – but I was suddenly nervous. We had known about this party for over a year; Debbie, an American woman accompanying our group, had financially supported Moses's education for years, and had invited us to join her at his celebration. We had met Moses a few days earlier and were able to talk with him about his experience as a kidnapped child soldier in the Lord's Resistance Army, but even after that conversation, I didn't feel like any of us knew him well enough to deserve being invited to his graduation party.

As the path wound on, we passed two large, somber-faced bulls, our first sign that people lived nearby. A few bumps later, the path widened, and we glimpsed a few straw-roofed homes before we entered a clearing and came to a stop next to a sprawling tree. My stomach lurched. No matter how much I looked forward to wherever we were going throughout the week, I always felt more comfortable next to the window than getting off the bus and forcing myself into

extraverted mode. It was hard for me to be outgoing when I was so unsure of my role. I never knew what people in Uganda expected me to be, and I didn't know what I should be, either. We had only spent a small percentage of our trip mapping, so I didn't have a project to hide behind. I was nakedly presenting myself to the Ugandan people, and I was embarrassed at what little I had to offer.

My feet somehow led me off the bus, and in front of us was a group of women sitting on mats, surrounded by towering piles of beans and meat, which they dropped one by one into black pots of frothing water. A few of them approached us eagerly as a group of men rounded the bus and walked toward us, too. I tried to smile, and I shook hands in every direction, getting more natural at the Ugandan version: grasp hands, then tilt hands upward to grasp thumbs, repeating additional times for closer relationships or particularly friendly strangers.

As my classmates scattered and left me by the tree, I didn't know where to turn. I stood, wide-eyed and frozen, and surveyed the area: at the far left of the clearing was a grouping of huts, then a large grassy area, and in the middle a covered wooden structure shading an assortment of mismatched couches and chairs. Elise was walking confidently over to the huts, so I trailed behind her. In the center of the circle of huts lay a woman on a mat, her deep wrinkles framing her sightless eyes. Elise bent down and began to chat with her while I hovered in the background. Feeling intrusive, I wandered over to where Chrissy was talking with a few teenaged boys, their eyes fixated on the soccer ball in her hands. When they began to play, I saw that even the smaller boys were competitive and skilled, and I decided to preserve whatever unathletic dignity I had left by walking away. Seeing a group of tiny children sitting under a tree, I headed toward them. None of my classmates were there, so I didn't have to compete with anyone's extraversion. I sat cross-legged on the warm grass and stumbled over the few words in

Achole I knew. They looked away. As I kept trying to engage them, Betsy drifted over, and we attempted to teach them ring around the rosy. Although they didn't pull away when we stood and reached for their hands, they stared expressionlessly at us and refused to move in a circle.

“They're afraid of you,” a parent smiled behind the tree branches. My heart sank.

Betsy and I sat back down, discouraged. As we stared at the kids around us, one little girl scooted closer to me, her eyes curious. She appeared to be around three years old, and she had a tiny baby swaddled to her back with a white cloth. I played with the grass in front of me, then I plucked a few pieces from the ground and blew them at her like confetti. Her eyes widened. I picked more pieces, then carefully dumped them on her head. After a few rounds of this, she began to grin and started picking her own pieces of grass, moving closer and closer to me. The baby on her back slept as grass pieces sprinkled down, and I gently brushed grass off both their soft heads. The girl's small mouth broke into a hesitant smile, and I grinned at her. For the first time that week, I felt a spark of connection. I wanted to reach out and take her hands, but I settled for offering her blades of grass in my cupped palms and letting her pick out pieces with her small fingers and blow them at me. By this time, the other kids had become curious and moved closer to us. Betsy had found a little boy who was modeling Katlyn's sunglasses upside-down.

A half hour later, after being torn away from the children to tour the village, I took refuge in the shaded pavilion. I plopped down next to Moses's graduation gowns and gulped down some water. Moses, Debbie, and Dr. Ziemke joined me, and we watched as a few men set up enormous grey speakers on wooden blocks, the combination reaching at least seven feet high.

“Are those for the traditional music?” Dr. Ziemke asked. “They should just sing naturally.”

“Oh, no,” said Moses. “We’re doing the traditional music for you first. The speakers are to play the American music after you leave.”

I laughed.

I saw a thousand thoughts flash behind Dr. Ziemke’s eyes. What was the significance of them playing traditional music especially for us? What was the significance of them playing “American music” afterward? How close are our worlds, and how far apart?

I continued to sit under the pavilion cover as my classmates trailed in and out. My little grass girl came back in a pink dress and without her cargo, and she brought her friend, a larger girl with a shaved head in a dark purple shirt. Her friend stared silently at me, then crawled in my lap and quickly fell asleep. I grinned down at her, grateful for this quiet connection.

As the women began to set up the meal, the people from the village—at least two hundred—began to sit down in a large semi-circle a few hundred feet away from the pavilion. I felt their eyes on me, and I felt incredibly unworthy of being in a place of honor with my classmates in the small pavilion with Moses, a man I barely even knew. For comfort, I squeezed the little girl asleep on my lap. Her round head rested in between my breasts, and her heavy body sprawled out across my lap.

As Moses’s brother started the prayer, a girl ran out from the crowd toward the pavilion. She rushed up to me, grabbed the hand of the girl on my chest, and pulled her stumbling back to the crowd. *No!* I wanted to yell back to her. *She can sleep on me! It’s fine!* My face grew even redder. The girl in the purple dress had more right to be sitting there than I did.

I tried to eat, but my clenched stomach objected to every tiny bite of rice or cassava, and just looking at the meat made me queasy. My head felt heavy and bruised. I left the pavilion and, trying to ignore the eyes on me, walked back to the bus. As I stepped behind the bus, I saw thirty

or forty kids sitting on the ground and eating plain rice off communal sheets with their hands. They looked up at me, chattering, and an older woman scolded them. My stomach turned. Fury bubbled up inside me: I hated that I had a plate, hated that I had been offered meat, hated that I got a chair in the shade. I stepped around the children as they grew quieter, walked onto the bus, and found my Advil. After swallowing a few with the little water I had left, I walked back to the pavilion, wanting to scream and cry and fall asleep at the same time.

Moses's brother began the ceremony, both of them having donned their graduation robes. My eyes glazed over as I focused all of my energy on staying awake. Finally, the ceremony was over, and it was time to dance. I sat up a little taller, energized by my anticipation. I had wanted for a long time to see traditional African music. We watched as two lines of men appeared from behind a house, marching, holding drums and wooden bowls and metal rake-looking-things. The leader had a whistle, and as they stomped closer, the music began. The beat of the drums pulsed through me as I watched, entranced. The music was fast, chaotic, alive. The steady beat was overlapped with layers of other beats that both fought against and fit perfectly with the heartbeat of the drums. The sounds were close and vivid. The men didn't sing, but the whistle shrilled at a constant pace, reminding me of the jarring ululation of the women in the choir at the rural Mass we had attended earlier that week.

A group of women began dancing along, and they pulled Dr. Ziemke up to dance with them. When all the kids rushed forward and began to dance, my heart swelled, and I decided I could muster up enough energy to dance with them for a moment. I handed off the camera I had been holding and joined the throng. A group of older women encouraged me as I tried to dance, and they kept pointing and trying to tell me that I needed to move my hips more. I laughed, thinking of how my little sister always criticized my lack of hip-movement, and then I sought out

a kid to dance with. I found a little girl with an oversized flowered dress falling off one shoulder, and I held out my hands to her. Soon, I was holding her, and we bounced from side to side in time to the music. Elise and Dr. Ziemke had been given sashes for their waists, and they shook their hips with the older women. Brad had a bowl and rake in hand, making music with the rest of the men. The aches in my body were replaced by drumbeats, and I looked into the little girl's eyes and grinned – this child, this moment, this music – I was flooded with a sudden and overwhelming joy, and it didn't matter that I couldn't shake my hips like Elise or have the confidence of Claire or the friendliness of Katlyn because I had this little girl in my arms and we were dancing – her hands held my shoulders and my skirt swirled around my ankles and we spun, the sun dancing with us as its rays steadily beat down – a dozen children were moving around my legs and my little pink grass girl was dancing with an older woman as the music grew faster and more excited – I couldn't smile any wider but I needed to, I was so happy – and I knew that this moment was what I had been longing for since we had arrived – for the first time since the plane touched down on the dark, hot runway, I felt like I belonged. I felt at peace with my role – I was white, but accepted. I was foreign, but included. In the music, we were all just dancers.

Eventually, the little girl grew heavy and the sun grew hot, so I had to sit back down in the shade. Exhaustion consumed me stronger than before. The kids went wild, jumping up and down when the American music came out of the speakers. I could barely keep my eyes open.

Soon, I found myself herded around, hugging goodbye to some of the women who had helped me dance. I couldn't find my grass girl. Then I was back on the bus, my head resting against the window pane as I waved to the kids standing below. The music still rang in my ears. I was asleep before we were back on the road.

Afterword

Mom: Are you still processing?

Me: Yep.

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