

*Peter Nelson*

THE CASTLE OF ST. GEORGE AT ELMINA AND THE  
PROBLEM WITH HERITAGE

At my twentieth college reunion, I turned to my friend Arnie, during the singing of the Norwegian national anthem (required at any St. Olaf College musical event), and said, above a chorus of *Vie elsker dette lander*, “You know Arnie—when I’m in Massachusetts, and I’m the only Norwegian-American guy for hundreds of miles in any direction, I’m proud of my heritage, and I talk about it all the time, but when I’m in Minnesota, surrounded by thousands of us, I’m embarrassed.”

Why embarrassed? Because it feels like a collective occulation. I feel my mind narrowing, my vision shrinking, when my conspecifics start to crow and strut, saying, “We are special, no one is quite like us.” I want to scream, “There are lots of people just like us! Get off the farm, Ole, and skip giving me credit for my ancestors, you fair-haired squareheads you, singing at the top of your lungs, as if trying to out-bellow the Germans at Rick’s Cafe in *Casablanca*. Enough already with the ‘Ain’t I grand?’ We are not the only people with a heritage. Get over it.”

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The Castle of St. George at Elmina sits on a rocky point on the Bight of Benin, on Ghana’s Gold Coast, at the part of West Africa where the continent takes a sharp left. Over three centuries, more than sixty castles, forts or lodges were built on this part of the continent in a three hundred mile stretch, which averages to one every five miles, kind of a tropical strip mall, set up by various European countries, the British, Dutch, Swedes, Danes, Germans, anyone who had an interest in what Africa had to offer. Elmina is a boxy looking fortress, bearing a vague resemblance to a Mississippi River steamboat, surrounded by windswept palm trees. It’s thought to be the oldest European-built structure on the African continent south of the Sahara, and it looks it, erected in 1482, ten years before Columbus sailed for America, by the Portuguese, for years the dominant power in the area, and still standing long after many of the other coastal structures crumbled into the sea.

My guide is Sedu Goodman, the Ghanaian architect in charge of restoring Elmina and Cape Coast Castle, eleven miles down the shore. Sedu is in his mid-thirties, well dressed, average height and above average alacrity, which is saying something, in a country where the people are as warm as the ocean breezes, as well as in light of his Sisyphean task.

“The weather here is brutal on castles, with the sun and the heat and the wetness,” he tells me as we stand on the parapet, gazing out at a pounding surf, unmitigated by any barrier reefs. The surf kicks up a corrosive sea spray which saturates the walls with caustic salt. The surf also glows blue with bioluminescence at night, bright as the numbers on a digital clock, which the castle builders must have found inexplicably beautiful. In addition to the sea spray, a light rain blows in and stings against our cheeks.

“And look,” he says, pointing, his manner of speech both emphatic and gentle, “you see, the castle’s eaves were built by Europeans who failed to appreciate that in the tropics, the rain often comes in on the horizontal. Yes? We have fierce driving rains here. The short eaves cannot possibly protect the masonry.”

His frustration shows. The walls get lime-washed catch as catch can, when the funding is there, but it’s ultimately a losing proposition. He points out iron bars, implanted during prior renovations, now rusting. The oxidized residue that leaches through looks like dried blood. Even interior walls discolor quickly. The rain and the sea spray blows through the castle, with only wooden shutters on the windows, but fighting the weather could only make things worse. Sealing the rooms would create an unbearable dankness. Dehumidifying or air-conditioning them would make the plaster dry and crack. The castle is respiring, a living thing which knows itself, and does not want to change, so the rain blows in, as it has for five hundred years, while the surf pounds the rocks below.

Sedu leads me past a room, an office in post-colonial times, where three girls taking part in a YMCA program sit at sewing machines, wearing red and white checkered uniforms they made themselves, and clean white ankle socks with sensible black shoes. At the end of the hall, in the former governor’s bedroom, the wooden floors are clammy and slick with moisture. The tropical air is heavy, and the mist off the bay smells like a sushi bar, sweet and slightly fishy. I gaze out the window. Below me, black men on the broad sloping beach haul in nets by hand, leaning into their work, while women wait to carry off the day’s catch with large aluminum pans on their heads, upside

down to keep the rain off. Every once in a while a man will part from the crowd, head down the beach, drop his pants, squat and then defecate in the rocks. The town of Elmina has no prettified tourist waterfront. The houses are the color of yellowed newspapers, some gray concrete, some wattle and daub, with corrugated tin or zinc roofs. You can smell, coming up from the streets, the open sewers, charcoal fires, fish smoking, goat and sheep dung, and the exhaust from the multi-colored cabs and mini-buses that rattle down the roads like tambourines, leaving behind brown clouds of smog in a country where controlling auto emissions seems about as likely a prospect as putting a man on Mars.

“Over there,” Sedu tells me, “is St. Jago fortress.” He points to a structure on an opposite hilltop resembling a small observatory, within cannonfire of St. George’s. “When the Dutch took the castle from the Portuguese, to do so they hauled cannons overland and set them up on that hill to shell this place, and then when they’d won they built a second castle, there, so nobody could sneak in again and do it to them, you see.”

From the seaward bastion, I stand at an embrasure and turn my binoculars east to the British fortress in Cape Coast, and ask Sedu how it was that two world powers, the Dutch and the British, could come so far and end up building castles within sight of each other. He explains that much of the coast was mangrove swamp, with little good anchorage and few protective coves. The trading rivals in the region also wanted to keep an eye on one another. Furthermore, Cape Coast was in Fanti territory, whereas Elmina was an Ashanti town, else the British might have built their fort even closer, the Ashantis a fierce war-like people who the British feared greatly, going so far as to arm the Fanti against the Ashanti to use Fantiland as a buffer zone.

“Then in 1897,” Sedu says, “the Dutch just sold the castle to the British, you see, and the people in Elmina felt betrayed, so when the British asked the people to turn in their weapons, yes? The people wouldn’t do it, and this made the British very nervous, so you know what they did? They turned the cannons around and shelled the town. Can you believe that?”

Colonialism never did have much to do with fair fights, but then, the Gold Coast’s castles weren’t built to protect the towns. The castles were built initially to protect the Europeans from Africa, with the main battlements on the land side, defending whites who seldom ventured beyond the discolored castle walls. West Africa was called the “White Man’s Grave,” host to pestilence, to bugs and viruses and enemies too small to train cannon on. The

Europeans also assumed, wrongly, that the indigenous peoples were all cannibals. The main purpose of the castles was to facilitate trade, the transactions in gold and ivory which gave this beautiful coastline its name, until trade in slaves became more lucrative than gold and ivory, and the dungeon storage rooms were converted to hold desperate dying human beings.

In that regard, it seems rather appropriate that the walls won't stay white. The problem for Sedu and his team is how to serve the needs of the castles' visitors, including those who come as "heritage tourists," descendants of the victims of the African Diaspora, looking to find a way back.

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In Europe, it's easy to surround yourself with buildings four or five hundred years old or more and imagine you've slipped backwards on the river of time. When I was in school at Oxford, I said goodbye to the girl who took my virginity (I didn't put up much of a struggle) in a pub that was eight hundred years old. In Stockholm, I stayed in Gamla Stan, the old city, and wandered ancient narrow cobbled alleyways, trying to find my hotel, full of Akvavit and bitterness. I hated Stockholm. I'd meet people and mention, "I'm writing a travel article about Stockholm"—did one single person ask me, "What are you going to write?" Did anyone offer a suggestion, "If you're writing about Stockholm, you really must see . . ." Not one. I felt quite politely abandoned, and arrived at the conclusion, a purely personal generalization, that the famous Swedish neutrality which kept them out of two World Wars, more or less, when applied to human social interactions, makes them a bunch of cold sons of bitches and the hell with them.

Traveling in Africa, you seldom feel like you've gone back four or five hundred years. You often feel, however, like you've gone back four or five thousand years.

We leave Accra, the capital, at sundown, though driving after dark in Ghana is counter-indicated, where there are no street lamps, where there are dangerous bumps and pot holes, cars with busted headlights, and cars upon which, even if both headlights work, they seldom point in the same direction. We pass Accra's central market, where each stall or kiosk seems to vend whatever is available to sell, oranges and flashlights, soccer balls and yams, eggplants and children's underwear, ocher colored soap in bars two feet long. Women have pans on their heads containing clear plastic bags of drinking

water, pure enough for Ghanaian consumption but not advised for visitors. Square loaves of butterbread, wrapped in plastic, sit stacked like cinderblocks beside stacks of cinderblocks. Everywhere people carry things on their heads, women bearing trays loaded with hot red peppers, men with single coconuts atop their pates. Young boys weave through the bumper to bumper traffic selling snacks from cardboard boxes; we try to buy cartons of pineapple juice from a throng of entrepreneurs jogging alongside the car, but at ten miles an hour, and a shouted misunderstanding, we end up with chocolate bars.

Our vehicle belongs to Kakum National Park, a maroon Toyota extra-cab diesel pickup. Mari Omland, director of Conservation International's Ghana Project, is in the back seat, and next to her is Debby Sohm, a young Fulbright Scholar here from Appleton, Wisconsin, to study tourism and conservation. Mari tells Debby that in Ghana women in moving vehicles would be well advised to wear jog bras. The ride is not exactly a rollercoaster—rollercoasters are much smoother. I'm thrown from side to side and front and back by our driver Sagoe's deft maneuverings around and over the pits and uplifts in the pavement, and after twenty miles of slamming into the door I feel like I've been worked over by an LAPD goon squad. We share the road with minivans called "tro-tros" containing passengers four and five abreast, baggage piled high on the roof. Many tro-tros have religious slogans painted on them, "*My Lord is Good*" or "*Jah Bless*," as well as more cryptic phrases that seem to fuse biblical and traditional proverbs, reggae lyrics and common sense. "*Poor No Friend*," as in, "When you got money, you got lots of friends, hanging 'round your door . . ." "*He Who*." He who what? "*What Is Written Is Written*." "*Think Twice*." "*Life Is No Day Job*." Even the shops we pass have religious slogans on them, "*Blessed Mother Hair Salon*" or "*Sacred Maiden Plumbing and Pipe Fittings*." Nine out of ten vehicles on the road look like they've taken a direct hit from a cruise missile, windshields cracked in a dozen places, or held together with duct tape. Some cars have dented doors where shadetree mechanics, lacking jacks or hydraulic lifts, will roll a car over on its side to work on the transmission. Half the cars are entirely one color, monochromatic, but the other half will have a blue right rear fender, a yellow left front fender, a red roof, a white hood, as garages scramble for parts, mechanics wielding welders' torches to modify a 1968 Mercedes Benz water pump to fit a 1987 Datsun. If the smog from all the car exhaust pipes molests my sinuses and makes my eyes sting and my throat hurt, it also makes for a dramatically red sunset here at the equator where the sun sinks quickly below the horizon.

Darkness falls like a drunk down a flight of stairs. The day doesn't so much end as hits its head and loses consciousness.

The African night sky is full of stars, no city lights to wash them out. Once we leave Accra behind us there are few lights at all. Occasionally a driveway to a hotel or restaurant might be lit by fluorescent tubes which point straight up in the air from their poles between the palm trees. The rest is gloom. As a newcomer I naively expect to see elephants in the road, lions eating zebras in the ditch. Instead, I see only black faces which loom suddenly out of the darkness, eyes caught in the beam of our weak yellow headlights, as we pass people walking down the side of the road with pans and baskets on their heads, even though we are in what an American might contemptuously call "the middle of nowhere," miles from any village or town. The villages seem prehistoric, about as "unplugged" as you can get, mud houses like man-made caves clustered atop bare red earth on eroded hillsides, entire villages lit only by the flickering yellow light of kerosene lanterns, or by charcoal cooking fires, small groups huddled amid a hundred tongues of flame. Goats and sheep scurry randomly across the road, and you have to pay attention to whether the tails go up or down, because if a tail goes up, it's a goat, and they're smart enough to get out of your way, but down, it's a sheep, and they're not, and if you hit one, you have to stop and compensate the owner. Crowds gather at the villages' central roundabouts, and many of the people gesture at us as we rumble past, seeing our Oroni faces and waving to us to stop and buy something, or simply in greeting. I remember a night in Manhattan when I was headed up First Avenue around midnight, trying to find an on-ramp to the Roosevelt Expressway, but they were all barricaded, the Expressway closed for repair, until I found myself lost in East Harlem, pushing through crowds of black or Latino teenagers hanging out in the streets, being stared at, yelled at, following detour signs that seemed to lead me into more and more dangerous territories, bad neighborhoods I knew I shouldn't be in, not at that hour, with this skin. Even in my residential neighborhood in the mapled hills of western Massachusetts we hang a streetlight every hundred feet, and flood our shopping mall parking lots in baths of halogen light because we're afraid of who might be approaching from the shadows. I've been in Africa for two days, but were the Toyota to break down I think I would feel entirely safe in these villages.

Robert Frost writes of becoming acquainted with the night. Here where there are no televisions or computer screens, no lit shop windows, no neon

beer signs, just a candle on the floor, a kerosene lamp or a glowing ember, the people and the night have never lost the acquaintanceship. They're comfortable in this darkness, beneath the uncountable stars. I want to learn to be.

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At Conservation International's guest house in Cape Coast, I meet Tom Ainsworth, a Canadian rock climber and ropes specialist from Vancouver who helped build the canopy walkway in Kakum Park. The walkway is a 330 meter rope suspension bridge which will give tourists access to the rain forest canopy, a place where formerly only research scientists were able to go. It's hoped the walkway will lure eco-tourist dollars to Kakum, but rain forest tourism is at a disadvantage in Africa, where on the open savannah safari guides in Landrovers can drive their camera-laden customers right up to a pride of lions. The price you pay is that sometimes there are more Landrovers than lions. You don't see many animals in the rain forest. The jungle is too thick, and they don't want you to see them. They don't want anybody seeing them. In fact, if you were to see one of the hundred and fifty forest elephants in Kakum, you'd be in deep elephant doo-doo, because the foliage is so dense that you can't see them until they're about twenty feet away, and if you get that close they might just stomp you to death.

"What are you taking for malaria, eh?" Ainsworth asks me in his thick Canadian accent. When I tell him I'm taking Mefloquine, he says, "Had any nightmares? They say that stuff is supposed to cause wicked bad dreams eh."

"Thanks for telling me," I say. "So far I haven't noticed."

That night I have a horrible dream. I am at our family's cabin in Wisconsin, which sits on a piney peninsula on Prairie Lake, north of Eau Claire. It was built by my great grandfather shortly after arriving from Norway, and it's over a hundred years old, full of Norwegian trinkets and family memories. It is the physical embodiment of my heritage, a shrine to my blood and my history, and stands for stability; it appears in my dreams at times of transition, when I'm moving to a new city, or when I'm getting into or out of a relationship. In this case it appears in my dream because I'm getting divorced.

In the dream an earthquake swallows up the front half of the family cottage, leaving behind an exposed bank of earth where the peninsula used to be. Firemen and rescue workers looking at the exposed bank of earth stand aghast, as we all realize, much to our surprise, that it turns out the cabin was

built on a huge pile of television sets—no wonder it couldn't survive the shake up.

Hmmmm.

My wife often objected to my bachelorly habit of watching television during dinner. We tried eating dinner with the TV off, but conversation came strained and awkward, and after a while we gave up and turned the TV back on, eating to “Cheers” or “Roseanne” reruns.

The nightmare wakes me up. Lying in bed I think about what kind of foundation makes for a successful relationship, and I think about heritage. The night before our wedding my wife and I and our parents went out to dinner, where my Italo-American in-laws mentioned they were traveling to Italy the following summer. “Are you going to visit the town where your family came from?” my father asked. My father-in-law looked baffled. “Why in the world would I want to do that?” he said, the notion almost incomprehensible to him, as if the past were something to be fled from, discarded and buried, forgotten, good riddance. My wife's grandfather (a Pole) threw his suitcase in the ocean because once the boat landed he didn't want to walk around looking like an immigrant. Heritage, to my wife's family, seemed in some ways a burden, not the priceless treasure I was taught mine was.

At my college reunion, the Norwegian national anthem still ringing in my ears, I looked around at my classmates, at the women I'd been friends with, at my old college girlfriend, and wondered if I should have married someone with the same heritage, or the same sense of heritage, as my own—what difference might it have made? Any? Some? A great deal? Could it? How? It's not like we're race horses, in need of a controlled breeding program to improve the stock. Yet everyone in my family married someone they met at St. Olaf College, my brother, both sisters, parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents. My grandfathers played on the same tennis team. None of them have ever been divorced. The fact weighs heavily on me.

A non-Scandinavian friend who married a Norwegian-American man once complained to me about his Scandinavian reserve; she'd been feeling ill, and mentioned it twice to him, without response, until she finally said, “I don't feel good and I told you I don't twice and you don't even care,” to which he replied over his newspaper, “I said ‘Oh,’ didn't I?” She felt his response was inadequate, though anyone who'd grown up around Scandinavian men would know “Oh” signifies a compassionate response of near-Schweitzerian proportion, particularly when accompanied by a dipping of the newspaper.

Lying under the slow-turning ceiling fan in Ghana, shaking off the dream, I think of the proverb which goes something like, "To build a house, use local stones." Better, at any rate, than building on a pile of televisions.

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In the central courtyard of the Castle of St. George at Elmina are two heavy cannonballs with iron loops set into them. The cannonballs sit before the only window in the women's dungeon. Disobedient captives (or occasionally insubordinate soldiers) were brought out in front of the others and chained to the cannonballs in the hot sun as punishment. More serious offenders were sent to a 7x10 cell with a skull and crossbones over the door, where they were starved to death. The courtyard is about the size of a handball court, with a balcony at one end. The only time the female slaves were let out into the courtyard was when the governor wanted to select one to have sex with. A nearby ladder leads through a trap door to the governor's bed chamber. Occasionally the governor offered such services to friends or visiting dignitaries. Girls who got pregnant were, in one sense, lucky, set free in the belief that their mulatto offspring would prove inferior slave material. Presumably the irony was lost on the European slave masters, the idea that a child half white would presumably not work as hard as one that was all black. Female slaves who were pregnant when captured, on the other hand, commanded a higher price, the fetus packaged in as a kind of human twofor.

Sedu Goodman suggests I take the guided tour, saying, "You go and I will catch up with you after I take care of some business. If you have any questions I will try to answer them later."

On the tour I am the only white man, surrounded by about twenty Ghanaian teenage school children on a field trip with their teachers. The girls wear brown and white gingham dresses, all made from the same material but in different styles to express their individuality. The boys wear white shirts and extremely baggy pants, some with cuffs so long they step all over them, pants they can grow into, which will have to last them a couple years, and which make them look sweet and clumsy. In the states, some schools have banned baggy pants on the grounds that gang members use them to conceal weapons.

The students carry notebooks and pencils, and jot down the dates and statistics the guide relates to us. In 1443, Prince Henry the Navigator sailed to Arquin, "A-r-q-u-i-n," on the southern end of the Saharan coast, and he was

from Portugal, “P-o-r-t-u-g-a-l. They came for the gold and the ivory, and traded guns in return,” the guide says, and the kids write “gold, ivory, guns . . .” We are told one hundred masons and one hundred carpenters were brought from Europe. We learn how many gallons of fresh water the cistern could hold, and how the Dutch first attacked in 1596 and took the castle in 1637. The slave trade, our guide says, supplying labor to Portuguese plantations in Brazil and Spanish plantations in the Caribbean, was well established by the year 1600.

As we follow the guide down into the dungeons where the male slaves were held, my discomfort grows. I half expect the guide to turn to me and say, “As the only white man here, perhaps you can explain to the children how your ancestors could enslave and murder our people?” I expect the school children to at least glance suspiciously at me, or edge nervously away from me, but nothing of the kind occurs. I have no Portuguese, Dutch or British blood in me, but I have been raised to understand it was my people, white people, who did this thing. I’ve never heard of any Norwegian immigrants owning plantations or slaves, no cruel squareheaded masters forcing African captives to pick lefse or toil in the lutefisk mines, but I feel guilty. Or maybe I feel like I *ought* to feel guilty, some stray politically correct impulse to enlarge my consciousness and share the pain.

“In this room,” the guide tells us, a room the size of a large convenience store, “perhaps three hundred men were kept. Ventilation came from there,” he says, pointing to a small window set high in the red brick wall. “You will notice, children, that there is a small gutter in the floor which leads down through the next three chambers and out to sea, through the Door of No Return—this served as the sewage system for perhaps a thousand men.” The gutter is about six inches across and an inch deep.

“If you look down,” the guide says, “you will see what appears to be a dirt floor composed of caked mud. Anthropologists have determined that it contains a large portion of human excrement, which was in some places several feet thick.”

Standing on the spot, breathing the dank air, still a thousand times sweeter than what it was when these rooms contained so many men waiting to be taken across the ocean, my eyes growing accustomed to the dimness, which was even dimmer before the installation of the bare overhead bulbs, I think you don’t have to be black to imagine the suffering, the hopelessness. For African-American heritage tourists (350,000 were expected to visit Ghana in

1995, up from 85,000 ten years ago) the empathy with their ancestors can be unbearable. Many slump to the floor in tears.

The guide explains the nature of the triangular trade which developed in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, adding an African dimension to the story. An interpretive film at the Cape Coast Castle's museum makes the same point, emphasizing that it's important for the Ghanaians to admit their complicity in the sordid business, and not deny it. Africans captured other Africans and sold them to the Europeans. Hausas transported Fulani or Tazawara prisoners purchased from the Yoruba, or the Ogoni, and sold them to the Ashanti, who either sold them to the Dutch directly or to the Fantis, who dealt directly with the British. Beyond the castle walls, it's impossible to say who captured who, who got sold, who took the profit. Prisoners could trade hands several times before reaching the castles. The Europeans gave the Africans guns, cloth and tools for slaves, took the slaves to the Americas and traded them for things like tobacco or cotton. It isn't exactly exonerating, but it makes white Americans responsible for slavery much the way we are currently complicit in the drug trade, not so much producers or wholesalers but predominantly as the market, the users, without whom, of course, there would have been no slave trade.

Thus when African-Americans speak of slavery as part of the continuity of experience which shapes them, that continuity, extended back through the castle, through the Door of No Return, embraces the history of inter-African experience and touches upon current inter-African events, in which the cruelty of slavery may be regarded in the context of Hutus butchering Tutsis in Rwanda, or the necklace killings in South Africa. In parts of Ghana today, young girls are held in servitude, indefinitely and without pay, and occasionally made into "wives" by priests to atone for crimes committed by the girls' relatives—in other words, slavery is still practiced. Africa's capacity for brutality can seem astonishing; former Liberian leader Samuel K. Doe, upon being deposed, was executed by being drawn and quartered by horses, and it's said that a video tape of the evisceration is for sale in Accra; yet it must be noted that nothing there is exclusively black or African in character, and no racial distinctions can be made. Africa didn't invent drawing and quartering. The atrocities in Bosnia are as atrocious, in degree if not in scale, as anything perpetrated in Africa, or in the camps by the Germans, at Nankin by the Japanese, against Native Americans in this country by whites, or in eighth century Irish coastal villages by my ancestors, the Vikings, once the terror of

Europe, dubbed “Berserkers,” now viewed historically (or so I was taught) as bold explorers.

“I would like to ask you,” one of the teachers, a black man of about fifty wearing a large crucifix, says to the guide, “because you have said that the Dutch were Protestants, and that the Portuguese were Catholics, and that both built churches here and worshipped in them, and so I ask, how could it be that people who are Christians could trade in slaves?”

Good question.

The school children stand with their notebooks poised.

The guide explains only that it was seen as a financial transaction, a business practice.

“And so we can say,” the teacher concludes, to provide the moral lesson for the benefit of his class, “that it would be as if we were to leave church on Sunday and go down to the market and steal a candy bar. So that if you are a Christian you should not do it.”

By far no expert, I’m nevertheless tempted to interject that at the time of the slave trade there were probably still church officials not entirely convinced that *women* had souls, let alone black African “savages,” who some argued were not even human. That what Christians might have been doing to Africans was no more or less cruel than what the Inquisitors were doing to the Jews, the Conquistadors to the Incans and Mayans, or what was being done by civilized educated Christian men to women who were convicted of practicing witchcraft. A good Christian slave trader might have convinced himself that enslavement was the luckiest thing that could happen to a black man, who, in captivity in America, would live a longer and healthier life than a black man in the African bush, or even that if a black man could be converted to Christianity he might conceivably even find eternal life.

A real win-win situation.

I say nothing. The tour leaves me both sad and angry. I want to leave this dungeon and go back to the parapets, and stand in the sun, and watch the ocean for a while.

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What one knows about one’s self, and one’s heritage, is not necessarily helpful in understanding other people’s heritages. It sometimes feels like it is an integral part of my heritage, as a Norwegian-Lutheran American, to just not

get why other people aren't exactly like us. Surely they'd want to be if they only could, right?

My heritage was force fed me, and I mean that in a literal sense. We ate lutefisk at Christmas, lutefisk a kind of fish Jello that results from soaking cod in lye until it decomposes and then re-coagulates. You can learn to like it after ten or fifteen years. It's a traditional Scandinavian way to preserve fish, and I was raised to think you could do nothing more Norwegian than eat lutefisk, until I met an actual Norwegian in college and said, "I'll bet you can't wait to get home where you can eat lutefisk every day," and he replied, "We don't eat lutefisk in Norway—we don't have to preserve fish. We live on the ocean. I never even had it until I came to America, but in Minnesota everywhere I go people keep feeding it to me. I wish they'd stop. I hate it."

Even so, I accept some things as irredeemably Norwegian about myself. For one thing, we have an emotive-expressive disorder whereby Norwegian men, when we're feeling really quite peachy, by the looks on our faces, kind of a benign default scowl, are frequently assumed to be rather miserable, and indeed, in the throes of ecstasy sometimes look like we're waiting in line at the Motor Vehicles Registry. My father once dropped me off, in ninth grade, at a friend's house, and my friend said to me, "Holy shit Pete—what'd you do?" My friend assumed by the grimace on my father's face that my dad was angry at me, when in fact he was in a really good mood. He was just grimacing. People approach me, uninvited, and say, "You know, it takes more muscles to frown than it does to smile," to which I want to respond, "Perhaps, but it also took more muscles to point that out than it would have to leave me alone."

Perhaps the best story is one I heard where Mark Twain, on a lecture tour, was speaking to a group of Norwegian immigrant farmers and getting no laughs at all, until he finally said, "Ladies, gentlemen, I'm going to go outside, and smoke a cigar, and think about this, and then let's all come back in and start over." Outside he overheard one farmer turn to another and say, "Boy, diss guy iss really funny," to which the second farmer replied, "Ja—iss all I can do to keep from laughin'."

Something like the apocryphal tale of the Norwegian man who loved his wife so much he almost told her.

My family hangs onto our heritage tenaciously. When my parents go to Norway they stay with fifth cousins, and when those fifth cousins come to the states they stay with us, a distance of several generations between us, and still

we open our doors to each other. I was thinking of this once, years ago, when I saw a friend wearing a long face in a cafeteria in graduate school in Iowa, and I said, “Cheryl, what’s wrong?” and she said, “My parents are such stereotypical Jewish parents—my mother is upset because I’m dating a Catholic, and my father is asking me why I had to go so far away to go to school, what’s wrong with NYU or Columbia?” I told her about my parents visiting fifth cousins, and suggested she not try to hang onto family so tightly, because you can’t get rid of them no matter how you try—sometimes fifth cousins come knocking on your door. She said she’d often thought about going back to Poland some day to see where her family came from.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Do you have relatives you can stay with?”

“Peter,” she said, looking me in the eye, “they killed all my relatives.”

I knew that.

What one knows about one’s self, and one’s heritage, is not necessarily helpful in understanding other people’s heritages.

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Kwame Adu-Sasah is a guide who leads interpretive walks on the trails of Kakum Park. His head is clean shaven, like Michael Jordan’s but he probably has less body fat than Michael Jordan.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Kakum National Park,” Kwame begins, giving his scripted spiel even though Debby Sohms and I are the only guests on this hike. The success of the park will depend to a great extent on people like Kwame, because eco-tourists come to get information, not souvenirs, and they come to witness, in the concrete, the things they believe in the abstract. They want to see bio-diversity in action.

Kwame walks slowly and speaks softly, making gentle gestures with his hands when he talks. He points out a *kuntum* tree, a snarl of peduncular roots merging into one main trunk about twelve feet off the ground, forming a kind of living cage. Another tree has more mystical properties—if there’s a dispute in the village where one party calls another a liar, for example, a potion is made from the tree which the person accused of lying drinks, and if he’s telling the truth it won’t kill him. If he says, “You know, I’m not really very thirsty just now . . .” he may not win the dispute.

Many of the trees have massive buttressed roots, some, like those of the *kapok* tree, large enough to hide a small house behind. As we come to one of

the few remaining mahogany trees in the area, Kwame explains that before it was a park this land was a forest preserve, logged both commercially and by individuals from the surrounding villages. Setting aside land for eco-tourism also depends on persuading the locals it's better to leave a tree standing than to fell it, sell the wood and use the money to feed your family or pay a doctor.

"In addition to being our supermarket," Kwame says, his accent strong, "the forest also has always been our pharmacy, where the people have come for many many years to find medicine. For example, this plant . . ." He points to a low plant with broad green leaves, "this plant, when the man and the woman have trouble in bed, you see, sometimes, the man's wife will tell her friend, or the friend will tell a friend, until maybe the news travels to the next village, and then we say of the man, he is already dead. You see? Because he cannot make the baby. So the man will take the root of this plant, and the seeds, and he make a tea to drink, and this helps him."

Farther down the trail we come to a tree with a hairy red-brown bark. Kwame explains.

"This tree is very important to our people. When the woman is pregnant, you know, and then she has the baby and she needs to feed the baby. Sometimes, to help her feed the baby, to make her lactate, she will take the bark from this tree and make a soup and drink it, and this helps her. Also, sometimes, the women will want to have what we call the American breasts, so the women will take the bark from this tree and rub it on their breasts, so that they have the American breasts."

Kwame heads up the trail.

"Just what do you mean," Debby interjects, "when you say they want American breasts? What do you consider an American breast?"

"You know," Kwame replies, "like Marilyn Monroe or Dolly Parton."

"That's two people," Debby protests, but Kwame pushes ahead, laughing.

As we walk back to the park headquarters, I can't help but wonder what would happen if the man having trouble in bed were to rub some of the organ-enlarging bark on his . . . when Kwame interrupts my reverie and asks, "Tell me please I don't know—is Marilyn Monroe dead?"

★

The village of Masamagor, on the east side of Kakum Park, is a former hunting camp now occupied by a group of Fanti people. The village is not far from

Cape Coast, as the pied crow flies, but the road in is rutted washed out gravel, and it takes an hour to go the last ten miles. The children of the village are adorable. We see none of the red hair or distended bellies that signal malnutrition in countries that can't feed themselves. The children also have perfect teeth, but some day somebody will pave the road in, and trucks bearing candy bars and soda pop will arrive, and then the smiles will not be quite so radiant.

We're here to witness a rehearsal of the village's bamboo orchestra. Mari and Debby and I are joined by Don Jackson, the project coordinator of the Midwestern University Consortium on International Activity's Africa program, MUCIA, a U.S. non-government organization involved in helping Conservation International develop the park as a tourism site. Jackson advises me that when I shake hands with the local men to always use my right hand and, if I'm meeting more than one person, to always start with the man on the right and move left.

"It's considered bad juju otherwise," he tells me, "and juju is real." It's also a sanitation practice—you shake hands and eat from the communal bowl with your right hand because you wipe your ass with your left hand.

Part of MUCIA's and CI's task is to help the locals find something better to do than hunt the animals in the rain forest for "bush meat" or harvest the vegetation; you can't hope to take away a people's livelihood unless you give them something to replace it with. A wild rain forest is still a resource which has to support the humans who live in and around it, the question only one of sustainability. It may be an unfortunate truism that today even wilderness has to earn its place if it wants to survive. American NGOs work with Ghanaian NGOs like Aide to Artisans Ghana, or Agoro, for the performing arts, to develop the human resources of the park's surrounding villages. Potters might be advised not to make pots too big to fit in the overhead rack of an airplane, or tourists won't buy them. Metal workers might be encouraged to make napkin rings, and they're beautiful napkin rings, shaped like water buffalo, but coming from a place where people eat with their hands you have to wonder how authentically African napkin rings really are.

The bamboo orchestra consists this morning of six drummers, four dancers and eight singers. Sections of bamboo, of varying lengths, are either bounced on a hard wooden slab with or without a hand over the upper aperture which changes the tone, or clicked together for the high notes to serve as percussive accompaniment to the singers. The musicians are all kids, fifteen and under. The sixteen- and seventeen-year-old girls stand nearby with babies on their

hips, joking and laughing. Everyone else is out working in the fields and cocoa groves. One of the women helping Agoro develop the village's musical potential for tourist consumption is a fair-haired woman from Denmark named Hannah Tofte who represents a Danish NGO. On the surface, it seems a bit odd to think of Danes teaching an African village people about traditional tribal dances or music, but then a music teacher is a music teacher, and in fact, Agoro has also brought in Ghanaian instructors to teach songs, percussion techniques and dance steps, all of which Hannah Tofte facilitates. She also apprises the Masamagorans of Obronni customs, that we might shake hands with either hand, that we don't mean to offend by not eating the food they prepare for us but are only trying to avoid lower intestinal distress, that we will quite possibly pay more money, when they pass the hat, if we've had chairs to sit on, perhaps a shaded pergola to sit beneath. The music is joyous, much unison singing and call and response, though I worry some day they'll use some phonetic simulation of "New York New York" or "Amazing Grace" as a show stopper.

At the end of the performance I toss a 5,000 cedi note into the hat. The musicians squeal with delight, as if Ed McMahon just delivered a Publisher's Clearinghouse check. Five thousand cedis is about three and a half dollars.

Then it's time to learn some new steps and we are invited to join in, so we line up as the dance instructor leads us in isolation exercises, counting one, two, three, four as he rotates his head, his shoulders, his right ankle, his left, and we try to follow along. The overweight Obronni eco-colonialists are no better or worse than the Masamagor children, though if they ever make a sequel to *White Men Can't Jump* and call it *White Men Can't Dance Either*, Donald Jackson is a shoe-in for the lead. As the exercises increase in difficulty, the black kids look at the white people and roll their eyes, and the white people look at the black kids and throw up our arms to say "This is impossible," and soon we are all laughing at each other because we all look very foolish and feel awkward and self-conscious. When the instructor tells us we're finished with our jungle-robics, we all applaud each other.

★

The gift shop at the Castle of St. George at Elmina is full of books, candle holders, brass lions, baskets, carved elephants, wooden bowls, masks, cloths,

postcards and beads. Sedu Goodman is schmoozing with the girl at the counter, but then women seem to fall all over Sedu, at least the ones I've seen who smile when he walks into a room, even though Sedu, a married man and a devout Muslim, has no guile behind his cheerfulness.

"How was your tour?" he asks me. "Here now, you must sign the guest book."

I fill in my name, my address, and in the box asking for my citizenship I write "U.S.A." Then, glancing up the list, I notice that in the citizenship box on another line someone has written "African-American." A minister from North Carolina, "African-American." A couple from Detroit, "African-American." A man and a woman from South Bend, Indiana, "U.S.A." from which I infer they are white.

"But look—look at the comments people make," Sedu advises me.

Visitors from Europe all write something like, "Very romantic. Quite beautiful." Visitors from Ghana write, "Very educational. Quite interesting. Very historical." Visitors who sign in as either "African-American" or "U.S.A." write things like, "Horrible," or, "This must never happen again," or, "Profoundly moving—never forget." The Europeans, of course, grew up with castles all around them, and see the Castle of St. George at Elmina as a continuation of their romantic past, a breezy and exotic outpost on the edge of darkest Africa, built at a time when Europe was the dominant world power, and domination was considered a good thing. The Ghanaians see the Castle of St. George at Elmina as representing a significant period in a grand and continuing history, an enemy stronghold during the Ashanti wars of the late nineteenth century, and a trading fort before that, including a trade in slaves, but after all, slavery didn't happen to their ancestors—modern Ghanaians are descended from those who stayed behind, not those who went. Even in colonial times, the British ruled with a hands off approach, and the Ghanaians never saw much of them, so they don't seem to regard the castle as any important symbol of tyranny.

However, when the African-American heritage tourists get here, they hit a wall. It's an invisible wall, but it's just as impregnable as any of the fortress's thick stone battlements.

"Some of the African-Americans," Sedu tells me without anger, "I have to say, they come here and start telling us we are doing something wrong by restoring the castle. These places were trading posts before slavery, and offices after slavery, and they were prisons and police and government headquar-

ters—so much of what we are doing is trying to undo what the government did when the castle was being used for offices. But the African-Americans think we are white-washing their history. They think we're trying to make it look better than it was. We have to save the castle for everybody, not just them. One day an American woman came here and demanded that a section of beach be set aside for every African-American who was a victim. How can she say that? How could we possibly do that?"

He shakes his head at the absurdity of the demand.

African-American tourists who come looking to trace their family histories hit a wall because you can't go any farther than these castles. The story of author Alex Haley tracing his roots is a rare exception, a one in a million long shot. Ancestors of those slaves who were allowed to keep their family names, or permitted to speak in their native tongues, might have a word or two to go on, to narrow it down to a country or a region, but in Africa no records were kept. None were kept as prisoners crossed through hostile territories from tribe to tribe and changed hands on their way to the coastal fortresses where the ships waited. Most African-American tourists who come here looking to trace their family histories can know only that they are African.

I cannot imagine what that must feel like. It would be like knowing only that I'm European, but I know so much more than that. I know the town in Norway we're from. I could visit the mill my ancestors owned. I can make jokes at my own expense, about the man who loved his wife so much he almost told her, because I know what's true and isn't true about us. I know I'm not Italian. I know I'm not Irish. I even know the difference between my Norwegian ancestors and the Swedes, which probably seems like a fine distinction to anybody else. Yet in Ghana alone, fine distinctions between peoples can be drawn in any number of ways, with seven major language groups and numerous minor ones, and black American heritage tourists cannot gain access or identify with any in particular, or go back any farther than 200 or 300 years without losing the thread.

It's also part of the American character, whatever one's color, to expect too much from our origins, and see our heritage in purely romantic terms, and assume everything must have been better there, better back then, simpler and truer. I hated Sweden in part because I went there expecting (even though I hail from the next country west) to be welcomed home somehow, and hear someone say, "You're from Minnesota—I have relatives in Minnesota," and I was made to feel the opposite of welcome. I fell into the trap of expecting too

much. And maybe I hated Sweden because I saw the worst parts of myself, the coldness and the chilly reserve of the Scandinavians, though I'm told Norwegians are much friendlier than Swedes.

Expecting too much may in part explain why some people in the tourism industry in Ghana will tell you, in a whisper, glancing about to make sure they aren't overheard, that the African-American tourists, some of them, are the new ugly Americans there, that they're rude to the wait staff, or look down on the average Ghanaians. "I could write a book," one hotel owner told me. Some Ghanaian tourism companies try to bridge the gap by arranging for African-American tourists to visit private homes or plant commemorative trees with the locals, or participate in ceremonies in which Ghanaian tribal chiefs bestow upon the visitors the African names which were taken from them.

Expatriated African-Americans who've moved back to Ghana call efforts to restore the castles "renovation," where Sedu Goodman and his co-workers call it "stabilization," a battle against the salt air, the sun, time. African-Americans fear that the castles are being converted into theme parks, Land O' Slaves attractions which mitigate the horror, and complain that the funding is coming from white organizations like USAID or the Smithsonian or MUCIA, so what else could they expect? The Ghanaian government's position is, it's our country, they're our castles, and you haven't contributed any money to help restore them, so pipe down and quit being so sensitive.

★

At a dance performance at African American Center for Music and Arts, in Kokrobite, on the coast half way to Accra, I encounter African-American tourists for the first time, and for the first time in Ghana I feel a tension. No words are exchanged between us, only glances, or the intentional lack of a glance, an aversion of the eyes, a sub-conscious involuntary acknowledgement of distance, if not hostility, on both our parts. Next to me is a table of black Americans, elegantly dressed. The women have had their hair braided. The men wear their shirts untucked, Ghanaian style. Before us, a sextet of drummers pounds out a furious beat on a variety of drums, one drum so large it has to be played horizontally, while teams of dancers in various costumes dance with tremendous athleticism and joy. We all order food, sip beer, take pictures and watch the dancers in this tourist show, white Americans at one

table, black Americans at another, and even though we don't talk to each other, those of us from the U.S.A. have more in common with each other, in countless ways, than the black Americans do with the Ghanaians. We can name the pig on "Green Acres." We know Texaco uses a red star for a logo. We know the best place to get your kicks is route sixty-six. We've all eaten Twinkies. We are in many ways the same people. Yet my sense is (or my paranoia supposes) that the black Americans are looking at me and thinking, "What are you doing here? This is not your heritage, it's mine—you can't have it."

It makes me want to buy them some lutefisk, but that could be taken the wrong way.

★

Hans' Botel is the nearest motel to the park, and stands to benefit from the proximity once eco-tourism gets going there. The owner is a man named Kwezi Hanson, and he comes as close to a type-A personality as you're going to get in this most laid back of countries. He's in his fifties, graying around the temples but still vigorous, with a beautiful young wife, Elizabeth, and three boys, the oldest seven, who play with him in the family band.

Hanson owned a hotel in Accra in the seventies, but wanted to move to a smaller town, so he bought some land in Cape Coast where he found he had a drainage problem; when the rains came they washed out his road. Rather than complain he took advantage of it, hired some locals, dredged out a lagoon to collect the water, and started a fish farm, where he grew tilapia until it occurred to him that the lagoon was rather pretty, and a good place to build a motel, or, technically, a "Botel." The Botel features a bar and a dance floor built out over the water on pylons. When guests mentioned they worried about mosquitoes, situated so close to the water, Hanson added catfish to eat the mosquito larvae. No mosquitoes. The trees around the lagoon are festooned with bird nests, thick as Christmas ornaments, housing weaver birds and kingfishers of bright yellow and blue. The main attractions at the Hans' Botel, however, are the crocodiles, which come when the kitchen staff throws bread crumbs on the water to feed the fish.

The food in the Botel restaurant is good, but even so, you take your chances. For example, I was advised it's wise before ordering to ask the waiter what he recommends, so I asked.

“The chicken curry,” he said.

“I’ll have that then.”

“We don’t have it.”

When Tom Ainsworth ate here he ordered an omelet, and a minute later saw his waiter sprinting down the highway looking for a chicken. Precision in communication is never a given, even asking simple directions.

“Is it far to the park?”

“Is not far.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far.”

“Well, would it take me an hour to walk there, or ten minutes?”

“No.”

“So it’s close then?”

“Is a bit far.”

You learn in Ghana not to sweat the details. You learn not to be impatient. If someone says they’ll meet you at noon, it might mean two, or four, or tomorrow. You learn to be glad to see people when you see them, hey look, it’s you, what a nice surprise. If I owned a vehicle here and wanted to paint a slogan on it, it would say, “Certainty is Not an Option.” Yet rather than finding such uncertainty and imprecision nerve-wracking, I find the opposite to be true—I can’t think of a trip that has left me more relaxed. You can’t worry about things, because you can’t call ahead when the phones don’t work, and you can’t leave messages on answering machines, or voice mail, and you can’t count on the gas station having any gas; you can’t count on anything, so you live purely in the moment. Time turns fluid and golden. Days blend into each other.

We are having a party. Sedu is here, as is Mr. Azika, Kakum Park’s head game warden, and Hannah Tofte, and Selite Nyomi, her cohort with Agoro, Mari, Tom, Debby, Don Jackson, Chuck Hutchinson, MUCIA’s man in Ghana, Tony Hyland, a British architect helping restore the castles, as well as Daniel Ewur, Ben Asamoah-Boateng and other park workers. Tom Ainsworth tells us he was up in the trees today, doing maintenance on the canopy walkway and almost “took a whipper,” which is what rock climbers call it when one end of the rope they’re hanging from comes loose, and as you fall you hear the “whhhht whhhhht whhhht” sound of a rope whipping through the air.

Sedu asks me where I’m from. I tell him I’m from Massachusetts and ask if he’s ever been there. He says no, but he’s been to New York, a city which “took a whipper” a long time ago.

“Can you believe it?” Sedu says, “Peter, I met a man there and I said, ‘Good day,’ you know? And he said to me,” Sedu wrinkles his face up, as close as he can come to a sneer, “‘What’s so good about it? What’s so good about it?’” He laughs, as if he couldn’t begin to understand how anybody might not find any day that they’re alive to be good. Perhaps he wasn’t in New York City long enough.

We drink beer, except for the Muslims and the born again Christians, and talk about the two soccer teams in Cape Coast, the Venomous Vipers and the Mysterious Dwarves. The story goes that a white man got off the plane, saw in the paper that the Venomous Vipers would be taking on the Mysterious Dwarves, and got so scared he got back on the plane and flew home.

After everyone has gone home, Kwezi Hanson asks me if the house could buy me a beer. Since the water isn’t safe, and since I’m trying to take care of my health, I agree that I’d better have one last beer, but only if he’ll join me. He tells me he lived in Hamburg in the early sixties, where he studied radio and television repair and saw the Beatles play at the Star Club. I tell him I can’t believe I’m talking to someone who saw the Beatles in Hamburg, and ask him, in German, if he speaks German. We converse auf Deutsch, briefly, though I apologize for my minimal vocabulary.

“*Warum hast du Deutsch studiert?*” he asks.

“*Ich habe keine idee,*” I say in my schwein-German. “*Ich habe geglaubt daß ich vielleicht den Weltkriegzweifilmen besser verstehen können,*” which approximately and ungrammatically says, “I have no idea why I studied German—I thought maybe I’d be able to understand World War II movies better.”

I tell him that I love his Botel, and that even though as a travel writer I’ve stayed in ridiculously swank hotels I could never afford in real life, I like his place better.

“When you decided to stock the lagoon with crocodiles,” I ask, “did you ever worry about tourists getting hurt?”

“You know, everybody always assumes I stocked the pond,” he tells me. “They just come. This is Africa.” In other words, these are wild crocodiles. Three in the pond are about eight feet long, with approximately fifteen others under four feet. And growing. And there is nothing stopping them from coming into my room, except possibly a fear of spiders. I ask him if he ever worries, or if he’s considered getting crocodile insurance. He closes his eyes, shakes his head and laughs.

“Love attracts love,” he tells me with a shrug, as if, but of course, need we say it, naturally, everyone knows this. “Hate attracts hate.”

★

The airplane home is one of the new 777s, with individual television screens on the back of every seat. Two seats over from me is a very beautiful young black girl with exquisitely braided hair, and I want to talk to her, to find out if she’s a Ghanaian coming to the states or an American coming home, but there’s a sleeping Pakistani woman between us, and besides, people in airplanes don an invisible “Don’t bother me” travel shell which makes conversation impossible. I’ve flown all over the world, and I don’t think I’ve had one good conversation on an airplane. It could be just my phlegmatic Norwegian reserve kicking in. I bet I could talk to people if I were a hard drinking Irishman.

Africa has left me with a glow. Almost a high. I can still feel it, even with two hundred tiny television screens shining on me. It may be what some aid workers find so addicting about Africa, even though people who come to Africa to work on development projects frequently burn out and give up, for a while anyway. A friend of mine in the Peace Corps in Togo writes me and says, “The whole African situation is too large for me.” She was frustrated when, after working for months to grow trees from seedlings in a nursery, the people she was working with failed, or neglected, or forgot to plant them, tap roots shooting through the burlap containers, all that work down the drain. Yet she also says she feels selfish, because she knows she’s gained more from Africa than she’s given back.

As the plane approaches Dulles, I think of handshakes. When the men shake hands in Ghana, they snap each other’s fingers. I was taught to leave my middle finger out, and they snapped mine, each snap sort of the African way of saying “Dude!” Sometimes men hold hands when they talk. When I first met Sedu Goodman, he put his arm around me and hugged me, mistaking me for someone else, and then we joked how all us Obronis look alike. I think also of my dance lesson, jumping around like an idiot in the rain forest with black children. I think of Kwame laughing on a jungle trail and asking me if Marilyn Monroe is dead. As the stewardesses prowl the aisles with drink carts, I think of jamming with Kwezi Hanson and his boys, me on a sour old spinet,

his boy Patrick on drums, Joseph on bass, Jonas on synthesizer organ, with Kwezi twanging away on electric guitar as I tried to lead them in a Bob Marley standard, calling out the changes, “E—‘*Many rivers to cross*’—A—‘*and I just can’t seem to*’—F sharp minor—‘*find*’—B—‘*my way over*’—E, then B,” until, after twenty or thirty times through, we found the groove, and we all sang, “*Many rivers to cross, and I just can’t seem to find my way home . . .*”

Then the captain of the plane interrupts with an announcement. He advises us to put on our headphones and tune in to channel nine, upon which we all hear, over a BBC news report, that O.J. Simpson has been found innocent.

In the Dulles airport in D.C., I feel like I’ve landed on a planet I hardly recognize, like that “Twilight Zone” episode where the plane goes up, enters a mysterious storm cloud, and when it comes down there are dinosaurs everywhere. This is more than the usual culture shock you might expect, coming from the third world to the first—it’s a double culture shock. In the airport bar, people have gathered around the televisions, blacks to one side, whites to the other. On the TV, black people cheer the verdict and say things like, “I don’t care if he did do it—this sends a message . . .” as if sending a message were more important than punishing a murderer. Whites simply shake their heads in disbelief. Black or white, we’ve all identified with O.J. Simpson, the first world famous celebrity murder suspect in history, a guy we’ve grown up with and lived with on television for the last twenty years, and so we could all put ourselves in his shoes (supposing we could find them) and imagine what he might be feeling. The Simpson trial is a national Rorschach test, I think, a Rashomon event, a Melvillean polysensuum, in which for over a year we’ve all been looking at the same thing and only now see that, for the most part, the blacks saw one thing, the whites another. The white shock is not so much that O.J. has gotten off—many whites expected he would—the shock is, rather, that we are so different from each other.

In the Dulles airport, I think one more time of how I felt in Ghana, a country without a history of white bankers turning down black men for loans, or of white cabbies refusing to pick up black fares, or of white cops pulling over cars driven by black youths for being in the “wrong neighborhood,” or of white shopkeepers eying black customers suspiciously, or of white people refusing to get on elevators full of black people. Ghana is a country without an ethos of victimization. I think of what Africa gave me, in so short a time, then look around and feel a kind of weight descending on me, one I’d not been aware of until I shrugged it off. It is my uniquely American heritage, a

history of racism and division which encumbers us all. It feels crushing, offensive, disappointing, and the worst is, it feels so unnecessary, but there's nowhere I can go to get out from under it, except back to Africa, and Africa is very far away.

I think, love attracts love, hate attracts hate.