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The White Screen

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The White Screen

Abstract

There was laughter all around me, and I couldn't help but join in.

I was at the orphanage, playing ball with a bunch of kids in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Despite being a little homesick and barely knowing the language, I was having few problems living here. I loved this place, with its ancient roots and friendly people. I loved hearing the morning's call to prayer when I woke up. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Study Abroad Programs, white culture, equal representation in literature

Disciplines

American Literature | American Popular Culture | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THE WHITE SCREEN

October 15, 2015

There was laughter all around me, and I couldn't help but join in.

I was at the orphanage, playing ball with a bunch of kids in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Despite being a little homesick and barely knowing the language, I was having few problems living here. I loved this place, with its ancient roots and friendly people. I loved hearing the morning's call to prayer when I woke up.



This is the country where my youngest brother was born, where he was raised for three years of his life before he became a part of my family. This is why, when I was figuring out what I want to do in the summer, that my only requirement was that it had to be in Ethiopia. I contacted the organization that had helped my family through the adoption process and through them I traveled to Ethiopia for five short weeks, heading out to teach kids English.

I just didn't know how much they would teach *me*.

On the weekends, or sometimes after the English lessons at school, I went to the organization's orphanage for kids with HIV/AIDS. As I knew most of the kids already from school, I made these trips to the orphanage so that I could hang out with them on a level I couldn't through teaching them. Unfortunately, many of the kids were into sports and, having very little athletic ability myself, I needed to find another way to really bond with them. During my second visit, the kids brought me into a room with a TV, handed me a thick DVD case and gestured for me to pick a movie to watch. Finally, my time had come: something neither sports nor homework related.

I was so happy as I flipped through that DVD case, seeing movies that I had loved and known since childhood. I saw the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (one of my favorites) and immediately started to mimic having a long nose and screeching, "*Childreennn! Lollipops! Candy! All free today.*" The kids shouted "Yes! Scary man!", laughing and smiling. I smiled and laughed with them, happy that we had found something to connect on.

We picked *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and as we settled down to watch, I thought that it was going to be so much better than playing soccer.

But it wasn't.

As we watched the movie, another thought crept its way into my mind that I couldn't ignore. Sitting among those amazing, smart, beautiful kids, who just happened to have skin darker than mine, made me realize that on the screen I could only see white.

I could only see white people.

How did I never notice this before? How could I have been so blind? As they all sat there, eyes glued to the TV, I took the DVD case and flipped through the movies again, my stomach growing heavy with dread. Instead of being hit with a wave of childhood nostalgia, I was smacked by movie upon movie of predominantly *white characters*. Few, if any, actually had a main character of color. I was dumbfounded. I glanced up at the kids' faces as they sang along to a song, trying to understand what it must be like to watch a movie where none of the people look like me.

Suddenly, I was filled with anger.

I was angry that there are so many people who don't see that this lack of diversity on screen exists very much in today's society. I was outraged that when someone points it out, they are more often than not ignored. And I was mostly furious at myself, for never having thought about how my brother must feel while watching a movie with my family, seeing our color on the screen but barely seeing his.

Then I had another realization: this problem is not limited to movies. This [lack of equal representation](#) expands into our [literature](#), [television shows](#), and almost every other form of pop culture. As an avid reader, I have read hundred upon hundreds of books. But if someone were to ask me right now to name a book I've read that has a black main character, I would have to think really hard before answering. [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#), the Nigerian author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, noticed the lack of people of color in books, too. She thought as a child that books were always supposed to be about foreigners, about people with lighter skin drinking drinks that she'd never had. The thought of that experience makes me sad; isn't the best part of a book when you are able to connect with a character?

There was a funny part in the movie, and the kids pointed to the screen, directing my attention back to the movie. There was laughter all around me; but this time, I couldn't bring myself to laugh.

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