

Story of Self

The ground is like glue, grasping the bottom of my feet as if holding onto me with an embracing force. The weight is heavy, but not unpleasant as I sink into the sand of Zanzibar Island. I can see the roots of the trees consumed in the ground in a similar way. Each wave of the ocean is like a breath, curling back into itself, forming a collective fluency. It's my first few days here. The fatigue of the three flights, two-hour ferry ride, and one-hour drive to make it to Kairo village cannot reach me just yet. The colors of the sky begin to blend with the water, I wonder if this is just another childhood dream as I wait for the blaring alarm. "Moto" says BigHead, that's what he called me. "Pole Pole" he says as we weave through a maze of sea urchins. My mind meets my body again as I watch Saleh and Jess tiptoe through the sand while the water reaches for their feet. In the distance, small flecks of yellow light seem to smear with my vision before approaching a large cabana. The four of us squint at the wooden sign painted with the word "Gelato" looking for our favorite flavors to order. Of all the exciting moments to come, from safaris to boat rides, I could feel the particular power of this one. The warm and magical simplicity of this moment set against the evident fact that I was over 10,000 miles from home. There was a beautiful intensity about sharing such a familiar situation surrounded with so much unfamiliarity.

It's two o'clock in the morning and I've chosen the UCSB library over my steel dorm bed. No warm sunset or gelato, just the clicks of frantic fingers across keyboards and caffeine holding together whatever is left of my strength. Academic papers were never my strength, yet I flow passionately through my ten page film paper on Orientalism and the media. By this time, Palestinian-American writer, Edward Said, is my idol. As an Arab-American myself, I became enthralled by his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), about the unbalanced hierarchy

between the West and non West, specifically in the Arab world. Said explains how the ‘Orient’ is something that has been designed to categorize people who are not a part of the West as the ‘other.’ I constantly reflected on this idea of the ‘other.’ Said’s words seemed to permeate through the work in my other classes, and suddenly all of my academic papers were connecting back to Orientalism and othering. When I was asked about my summer plans, surely a trip to Tanzania was not what people expected. I can recall the unsettled faces often poorly masked with disingenuous excitement. Even those who were supportive would acknowledge my ‘bravery.’ Rather than get defensive, I understood that many came from a place of concern. Their judgment was most likely clouded by stereotypical Hollywood films and frequent commercials which made you believe it was crucial that you empty your bank account for the entire continent of Africa. As I watched movies like *The Sheik* (1921) in my 101 film classes or constantly learned about knowledge produced in the West, I felt a longing to lift this veil of fabrication; an aspiration to hear and speak about not only my own culture, but the influence of the world at large.

It is the summer of 2021 and I notice my hand tightly clutching the car door as I sit in the passenger side of the Nissan 350z. I’m weaving through the streets of Rabat, Morocco with a friend I met about an hour prior, okay yes, a stranger. What sounds like the beginning of a great horror film turned out to be one of the best decisions I have ever made. We stop at the front of a large gate that reveals a few more strangers who look miniature compared to the ginormous house that surrounds them. I begin to wonder if ignoring the informality of the Facebook ad titled “Volunteer for Free in Morocco” a month ago, was such a great idea. Yet, somehow, I feel like I am exactly where I need to be. It did not take long before these strangers felt more like family. I watched as we devoured McDonalds and listened to the sound of French words pass

through my ears. “Speak English guys” Ismael would say thoughtfully, but there was something authentic about being a part of something I could not completely understand. Something I would come to be a part of in my own way. Yet again, it was the simple moments, the ones that felt unfamiliar, that came to feel the most genuine.

After my experiences traveling I began to feel that pieces of myself lay all over the world like a puzzle waiting to be connected. Some might say my love for traveling is a mix of my impulsivity and desire to escape reality, and I can’t deny that there is some truth behind that. However, it is truly driven by my appreciation for culture and community. Storytelling has been a significant bridge between my passion for writing and love for culture. A deep appreciation for people’s values and experiences seems to find a home on the blank pages of my notebook where they could turn into a story. Traveling has been a reminder of the power of empathy and vulnerability which has fueled my passion for global awareness. I have come to understand that human connection is not limited by language and culture, but strengthened by emotion. There has been a true value in deeply trusting and bonding with people who lead different lifestyles than my own. Through writing I aim to share the stories and lives of people throughout the world. While the West has become globally disconnected, writing is a way of emphasizing the meaning of connectedness. Storying the experiences of others is an opportunity to convey the authenticity of places across the world which have repeatedly been characterized by the West’s depiction of them. I hope that I can create awareness around global issues, culture, and values through my work and show my appreciation for the countries that have taught me the meaning of connectivity.