

9-1-1999

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Kim L. Robinson

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Recommended Citation

Kim L. Robinson, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*, 5 Buff. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 295 (1999).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/bhrlr/vol5/iss1/10>

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OUT OF AMERICA: A BLACK MAN CONFRONTS AFRICA

Keith B. Richburg
BasicBooks, HarperCollins, 1997

Everyone has a story -- their personal experience -- and no one's story is to be denied as invalid. Undoubtedly, many will want to invalidate this one. *Out of America* is Keith Richburg's story of his experiences over three years as a *Washington Post* correspondent. Richburg's account is at once bitter and pessimistic as well as courageous and refreshing for its blunt honesty. *Out of America* is in fact two stories: one is Richburg's vision of Africa; the other is a critique of Black America; interwoven through both is Richburg's discovery of his own identity. Although Richburg reveals some powerful truths as he attacks a variety of sacred cows, his overstatement of the negative and his ahistorical and acontextual analysis undermine *Out of America* such that it reads like a shallow diatribe. Ultimately, the reader is not worn down emotionally from the tragic tales of coups, starvation, disease, and corruption that befall the African continent. Rather, the read is numbed into boredom by Richburg's unbalanced and virtually unqualified negative portrayal of Africa.

It is expected that a journalist would approach Africa skeptically. Moreover, as a journalist it is not surprising that Richburg would be witness to the continent's worst horrors. However, for the reader and Richburg, it is truly unfortunate that his sojourn rarely took him to places and situations where the humanity, warmth and hope of Africa were also manifest. What is unexpected is how Richburg's account demonstrates such grave naivete at the same time as it reveals a lack of empathy and vision.

For example, Richburg's greatest lament is that Africans do not rise up in revolution to overthrow the despots that ravage the

continent and trample on the human rights of Africans.¹ This is a legitimate regret, but one expressed wholly out of context. On the one hand, Richburg reports the imprisonment, repression, torture, and murder of political activists. Then, on the other hand, he expects people who are struggling for their daily existence to voluntarily expose themselves to these risks. The perspective is unrealistic and simplistic. Moreover, Richburg implies that opposition to political struggle merely requires taking to the streets rather than mass organization, a unifying ideology, international pressure and possibly, guns for that matter. The Zimbabweans, Namibians, Mozambicans, and South Africans (just to name a few) would strongly reject Richburg's vision. In a world order in which America and former colonial powers continue to incite ethnic rivalries and prop up dictators with money and arms, it is unfair to demand that Africans revolt spontaneously. Further, it is problematic that Richburg completely absolves the international community of *any* culpability. Richburg correctly points out that ordinary Africans have the primary responsibility of determining their future and seizing their liberation; however, that fact is not mutually exclusive of the critical role non-African states have to play in that process. In this context, it is easy to see why Africans don't more readily jump on the bandwagon of self-sacrifice even if it would be in the long-term interests of their respective countries.

Out of America resonates with the tensions inherent in Black identity -- as experienced in America and in Africa. Richburg pointedly and rightfully challenges simplistic notions of a pan-African identity. Unfortunately, he replaces them with his own oversimplification: that there is *nothing* that bonds Black people across boundaries. My own experience in South Africa tells me otherwise. Whereas Richburg sees the fact that Africans "look just like me" as a source of fear, I experience the same phenomenon as a source of powerful empathy.² Yes, I feel with Richburg that I could have been one of them. But whereas Richburg feels apprehension as a result, for

¹ KEITH B. RICHBURG, *OUT OF AMERICA: A BLACK MAN CONFRONTS AFRICA* 181 (1997).

² *Id.* at 55. See also xi, 85, 92.

me that fact gives rise to a sense of solidarity and identification with Africans.

Ultimately, Richburg finds that he is “an American, a black American, and [he] feel[s] no connection to this strange and violent place.”³ I accept and believe Richburg, although my own vision of my identity is different. In fact, I do feel a connection to Africa.

Most controversially, Richburg “celebrate[s] the passage of [his] ancestor who made it out” by way of the slave trade.⁴ Richburg explicitly states he is not presenting an apologia for slavery.⁵ Notwithstanding his qualification, Richburg’s ruminations on slavery and his ancestors are provocative as well as problematic. He applauds the fact that his ancestor “got out” by viewing contemporary Africa without considering what the continent, never mind what Europe and the New World, would have been like in the absence of slavery.⁶ This ahistorical approach is profoundly disingenuous and analytically unsound. It is as if Richburg concludes that Africa is inherently problematic and that the history of slavery, colonialism and imperialism had no impact on its present conditions. Surely, Africa has felt the slave trade’s horrible consequences and in its absence Africa would have been different. Clearly, we cannot say exactly what Africa would have been. But never to attempt to reflect on Africa’s positive possibilities alongside its negative ones is logically incoherent and false. Moreover, such a perspective hands to the implementers and beneficiaries of the slave trade appreciation they do not deserve. For that Richburg is to be faulted.

Simultaneously, although America makes him feel alien⁷

³ *Id.* at 227.

⁴ *Id.* at 233.

⁵ *Id.* at xiii.

⁶ *Id.* at xiv.

⁷ *Id.* at 233.

despite the fact that Black Americans would occupy the top spot in an “ethnic pecking order, based on the number of years in the New World,”⁸ Richburg only cursorily criticizes America. It is as if a racist America is the better of two evils, with Africa being the other evil, and that’s the end of the debate. The absence of a challenge to the reality of his alienation in his home after the passage of his ancestor four hundred years ago is a troublesome silence that seems to acquiesce to racism.

Because of Black Americans’ non-existent bonds to Africa, Richburg concludes that we should focus on building a better America rather than dreaming of elsewhere. I do not altogether disagree -- the fact that Black America has its eyes elsewhere does prevent it from fully committing to America; however, again Richburg makes another ahistorical and acontextual pronouncement. He makes important omissions in failing to speak to our historic commitment to America and why Black Americans are looking elsewhere.

Richburg forgets that more than any other ethnic group in America, Black Americans have believed that America would live up to its values of democracy and freedom. In fact, we have breathed life into those values despite being denied those rights. It was the abolition of slavery that gave rise to the equal protection clause in the United States Constitution, where none existed before. This clause has not only been used to advance the rights of Black Americans, but by women of all races, aliens and the gay and lesbian community. The equal protection clause has no doubt resulted in an America that is more just and inclusive. Now the jurisprudence of equal protection is being used to deny people of color opportunities as it is being misapplied to erode affirmative action. Further, the Civil Rights Movement made the right to vote and the first amendment rights to free speech, free assembly and the right to petition the government meaningful by Black Americans testing those rights against jails, fire hoses, and police dogs.

Richburg urges Black Americans to look to America, without

⁸ *Id.* at 228.

acknowledging that we have.⁹ Black Americans look longingly -- and I do not suggest unproblematically -- to Africa because of the despair we have about America. With good reason we doubt that White America will ever do the right thing and sincerely address the legacy and continuing harm of racism. One need only reflect on the debates over affirmative action, welfare reform, immigration, and the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court as a few examples of America's contemptible racial politics.

Richburg yearns for a society that is simultaneously truly color-blind and multiracial.¹⁰ Quite frankly, I don't know what that is. The two terms seem irreconcilable because together they represent an oxymoron. Richburg takes a jab at Black Americans who wish to affirm their Africanness by remarking that he never met an African who knew what Kwanzaa was.¹¹ The slight is indicative of his own ignorance. Kwanzaa is not purported to be an African holiday -- it is an American creation with African themes. Richburg describes the fact that racial debate in America is no deeper than a soundbite.¹² Perhaps in invoking buzz words such as "color-blind" and "multiracial" Richburg remains just as superficial in his own racial analysis.

Out of America grates on one's sensibilities in its all or nothing approach. For both Africa and Black America Richburg declares that "the enemy is within."¹³ However, why doesn't Richburg recognize that the enemy is *also* from without? Richburg correctly shakes Africa and Black America from their complacency in advocating that they accept individual and community responsibility. More significantly, he appropriately condemns the

⁹ *Id.* at 237.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 236.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 235.

¹³ *Id.* at 179.

African dictators that loot the continent and the Black American leaders that defend them.¹⁴ For attacking the conventional wisdom that criticizing African leaders is racist Richburg is to be commended. But, Richburg is curiously silent on the role of racism in the exclusion of Black Americans in the mainstream of society and in formulating American foreign policy towards Africa.

I strongly contend that America owes both Africa and African-Americans reparations -- but I just as strongly insist that Africa and African-Americans determine their own futures. I do so because those reparations are not forthcoming despite the legitimacy of the demand. Welfare and foreign aid are not reparations, as Richburg suggests,¹⁵ rather real reparations could take the form of economic investment and policies that redress underdevelopment and provide genuine empowerment. Richburg implies that an acknowledgment that racism persists and that redress is due is mutually exclusive from promotion self-sufficiency. They are not.

One of the most poignant aspects of *Out of America* is its lament over the wasteful loss of life due to war, disease, famine, and crime.¹⁶ Richburg's refrain is drummed into our heads: "This [is] Africa and you don't count the bodies."¹⁷ The images of corpses floating down rivers and stacked in piles -- and their anonymity -- do not make for a hopeful vision of Africa's future.

Richburg makes one concession when he notes that the bodies are in fact being counted at the scene of a massacre in Johannesburg.¹⁸ However, when something right happens in Africa, Black Africans don't get the credit. Richburg takes it one step further: South Africa is different and better than the rest of Africa because of the humanizing presence of Whites and Western values.

I reject Richburg's implication that it is the presence of Whites that has resulted in a situation where the bodies are being counted. Has he forgotten the violence done to Blacks by Whites

¹⁴ *Id.* at 138-39.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 180.

¹⁶ *See, e.g.* 117.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 207.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 198-99.

during South Africa's 300 years of colonialism and 40 years of apartheid on top of it? Even he acknowledges that when violence and crime were relegated to Black townships under the White minority government no one counted the bodies.¹⁹

Richburg's analysis notwithstanding, South Africa is an African country and the bodies are being counted, to some degree in spite of and not because of White South Africans. By virtue of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), post-apartheid South Africa is going through a painful and slow catharsis and that is achieving, among other things, a counting of the bodies. The theory has been that without truth -- an accounting of it and an apology for it -- there can be no meaningful reconciliation. Through the TRC, the human rights violations perpetrated by the apartheid state, liberation struggle organizations, and individuals are being revealed. In return for an apology and a full and honest account of the atrocities committed, amnesty is given to the perpetrator. For Black South Africa, the process is an official acknowledgment of what they experienced and knew to be true. For White South Africa, the process is a revelation of how horrific apartheid was. The TRC is not without its critics or shortcomings; however, it is being hailed generally as a success and critical part of South Africa's healing. The process is giving voice to survivors and victims and making public the wrongs committed on both sides of the political struggle. The TRC has ensured that some justice has been done where none would have been possible. To address Richburg's argument that White South Africans are such a benevolent force, I only need point out that the National Party, the designers and enforcers of apartheid, are suing the TRC.

The TRC undoubtedly is a hopeful development in Africa that

¹⁹ *Id.* at 207.

will be a model for countries throughout the continent. The TRC also provides a useful comparison for America -- which despite the tragedy of slavery, never had a process to reveal the truth and apologize for it. The forty acres and a mule were never provided. America has not had truth. Consequently, there has been no reconciliation and the distrust of Black America will persist because its harms have not been recognized, apologized for, and redressed. Because of the TRC, among other things, South Africa has a more promising future regarding race relations than America.

Undoubtedly, many will want to wholly deny Richburg's account of his personal sojourn through Africa. That would be unfortunate. An account of a Black man in which he expresses empathy for a White South African, lambastes African leaders, and celebrates that his ancestor made it out of Africa in the slave trade is bound to invite hostility. But to react with denial would indicate a refusal to see -- and ultimately, this is the problem with Richburg's narrative. Readers should not respond to Richburg's inability to see the promise of Africa in spite of its profound obstacles with an unwillingness to see these very problems. If as readers we refuse to consider and confront that aspect of Africa's reality we also miss the opportunity to analyze the continent in all its complexity. Richburg bears witness to Africa and to the extent that he speaks many unspeakables, *Out of America* is worth reading. Richburg stereotypes and denigrates Africa and its peoples. Ultimately his narrative is an incomplete, ahistorical, and acontextual account of the continent.

Kim L. Robinson²⁰

²⁰ Kim Robinson lived and worked in South Africa for two years. She served as a clerk for Justice Johann Kriegler of the Constitutional Court of South Africa and was a Fulbright Scholar with the Gender Research Project, Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Kim also was a Human Rights Intern at the firm of Smith, Tabata & van Heerden in King William's Town, South Africa. Kim earned her B.A. from Hunter College of the City University of New York and her J.D. from Harvard Law School. She is currently an attorney with McCutchen, Doyle, Brown & Enersen, San Francisco.