

Keith B. Richburg. 1999. Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa. Basic Books New York.

Out of America is not about Africa, although Richburg presents a good exposition of Sub-Saharan Africa during the turbulent early nineties. By the first chapter I was already saying to my self, "Okay, to where is all this heading". But I read on, just like he wanted and by Chapter 8, in my view the "main event" manifested.

Africa is *the sideshow*, a term Richburg uses when referring to black-on-black crime that he witnessed, while he was in Johannesburg. "But in South Africa, blacks killing blacks became the side show to the main event: the epic struggle of good against evil. Further north, in Somalia, in Rwanda, in Liberia, in Zaire, there was no main event, just the killings, the brutality, the sideshow as reality " (p. 211). Africa is literarily the sideshow of the book, the cloak covering Richburg's main event. It is very easy to miss thanks to Richburg's mastery of literary hypnosis, but this book has more to do with 40 Acres and a mule, than Africa.

This book has a number of purposes and one of its purposes is to raise awareness about Africa in the west particularly amongst African Americans—the likely primary audience.

Another interesting observation, is that Richburg's criticisms of the "oppressive" white establishment (the west), are quite benign. This seems consistent with his survival mechanisms as a black person in America, or should I say, his tendency to always try to appear as a "non-threatening" black man, especially in public (p. 229). When confronting white transgressions, he appears a tad less like the very "forthright and unyielding" Journalist we have come to know. I guess one can say that he pulls off a sort of psychological success, this way—"Kill em with kindness".

One of the more significant purposes of the book is that in an almost infantile, yet effective way, it serves as an "I told u so" type response directed at a group of sometimes nameless individuals cited in the book whom I shall for lack of a good unifying term, call the "Anti Richburg" coalition. And the members include: his black colleagues at the Washington post who didn't appear to care much about his lunch date with the white press secretary, the African American Leaders who extolled African leaders at the Congo Summit, those black journalists who advocated partial reporting of black politicians in America, the black cab drivers in Washington DC who denounced the Washington post/media, the black girl with the Afro comb in her hair, remember her? Back in chapter one? The girl who got pissed at Keith's eleventh grade white classmate's remark. But I am not done yet: the black academics are also condemned in Richburg's court of Ideals, along with the black kente cloth wearers, in fact any black or to a lesser extent, white person who intentionally or inadvertently forces

him to reckon with his blackness, anyone who expects him to uphold his "duty" to his own race, any one who subscribes to anything adverse to his ideal—that utopia where he isn't forced to take sides. Interestingly, this "crazy glue" adherence to his Ideal, sometimes renders him totally blind to alternative views, good or bad—If the Irish can celebrate st. Patrick's day, and almost make it an all American social and economic affair, why then does he suggest that Kwanzaa is of little value? It just doesn't follow.

In the process of persuasion, he exposes one of the things that appear to drive at the very heart of his struggles—the issue of reparations. "But it was my old man who spoke up, came to the rescue, and his blunt manner hadn't been made any smother by his seventy-plus years" According to his father, "Those black, folks you see out on the streets think the white man owes them something. They are still waiting for twenty acres and a mule (p. 181)". Actually, it was forty acres, but who is counting.

Richburg, though very compelling is sometimes too idealistic, and excessive Idealism does engender cutting corners. History exemplified this in Hitler's Germany (I know this is an extreme case, but it was still the result of Idealistic excesses). In Richburg's mind, this pursuit of his ideal society alone is imperative, and stands as a most high duty, higher even than that basic prima facie moral principle of Ross's which demands that one atone for ones misdeeds—*reparations*. History has taught that to atone for ones misdeed is to ensure that the misdeed is never repeated. And the U.S. Govt. is not the only culprit here. Republic of Benin (Dahomey) for example, is far from immune.

Once again, he renders a good exposition of the sub Saharan African condition in the early 90s, which if I may add, serves a social good. In the last chapter of the book, his miserly optimism coupled with his recommendations for peace and progress in Sub Saharan Africa did hit home—new constitutions, level playing field for opposition, Police overhaul, freedom of the press, fair and better managed elections, voter education, decentralization (federalism), and geopolitical modification of the continent from the colonial ("divide and rule") layout to a more culturally sensitive layout. But again Sub-Saharan Africa is just merely at the periphery of his dilemma. His bitterness was fostered in America, exacerbated by the mistaken bank robbery (p. 230), by the department store incident (p. 229), by the roller derby incident (p. 15), by the taxi cabs in Washington DC (p. 229) and by those whites who although are well-intentioned, still cant see beyond his skin color (p. 231). Bitterness that was already fostered long before he ever set foot in Nairobi. This book is really about America and Richburg's frustration with the black community, which he feels is not as dovish and congenial as he is towards the majority white "establishment", his frustration with African Americas over what he calls voluntary segregation, his frustration with those who have chosen not to, as they say, let the "supposedly" sleeping dogs lie and his frustration over the African American's romanticization and appreciation of an African as opposed to an just an American heritage.

Richburg's chilling account of his three years in Africa as a Washington post correspondent surely makes a guy like me look really insane for clutching tightly to that green passport. Who knows, maybe I'll be dashing to the passport office in DC, waving old glory and asking for a "trade in" upon returning from my long awaited trip home.

Ike Egudu
iegudu@hotmail.com