

***Keith B. Richburg. Out Of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa. New York, Basic Books; 1997. Pp. Xiv + 257. \$24***

I first noticed the significance of this book by Keith Richburg when the author was making his rounds on television talk-shows promoting what he called his own personal experience and account of Africa.

At first , I must confess, I was seriously perturbed and troubled by this ugly portrayal of Africa and Africans. The vexation caused me to dash immediately to the University of Virginia library - an institution that I was affiliated with at the time - to inquire whether or not the book was available.

Upon checking out the book , I noticed that no one else had borrowed it and during the several weeks that I kept it for my meticulous and patient perusal, the book was never recalled. This indicated to me that either the members of university community were purchasing their own copies or the book was generally ignored by the highly educated and informed community. Upon reading the book, I found it difficult to accept the subtitle because Richburg is not confronting Africa in any sense. He confronts himself, his realities of being Black in America, and wanting desperately for racism to disappear and the fact that he yearns for a kinder and gentler America. In order for him to justify his American-ness he chooses to denigrate his ancestral heritage - Africa and Africans.

Richburg did not reveal the reason for his present day state of mind until the tenth and last chapter of his book. Here he explains why he traveled to Africa: "Africa. Birth of civilization. My ancestral homeland. I came here thinking that I might find a little bit of that missing piece of myself. But Africa chewed me up and spit me back out again. It took out a machete and slashed into my brain the images that have become my nightmare" ( Richburg 1997: 225). Confronting the circumstances he finds himself in Africa, are devastating to Richburg. The killings, the human suffering, poverty, corruption, and disease, all make Africa an alien and ugly place and Richburg wants nothing to do with it.

But interestingly he juxtaposes his unwillingness to be called African-American with the problems he and other Blacks face in America. He laments: " Yet despite our 'American-ness,' despite the black contributions to the culture America claims its own, Black Americans have consistently been made to feel like strangers in their our own land, the land where we have lived for some four hundred years" ( p. 228).

Actually, it is Richburg's ugly experiences with racism in America that is central in his "pain" and the search for a kinder and gentler world and when Africa ( his ancestral home) failed to provide that haven or shelter, he did the next best thing - he lashed out at Africa. One needs to recall that Richburg struggles with the injustices of the places that he has lived.

### **The Personal Torments**

Richburg's book is certainly one that deserves to be read by all Black people everywhere and especially by those who find themselves in positions of power in Africa for it raises many issues at different levels.

First, for Mr. Richburg, it is an account of the search for a successful society, preferably Black which - will accept him as a human being. He would like this society to be successful economically and stable politically.

His arrival in Africa is a disillusionment; one which portrays African societies as inundated with innumerable problems. And because he genuinely wants to gain the respect of his fellow Americans and be accepted unconditionally by the American society, he denigrates Africa and calls on Americans to forget their hyphenated identity and to be satisfied to be called Americans. This is a wonderful undertaking on the part of Richburg but one continues to see other Americans (especially white Americans) who are proud of their ancestral roots regardless of the problems in the countries of their ancestry. These Americans brag about their heritage. Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and those from many parts of the newly independent states do not hesitate to identify with a cultural place. Richburg's account portrays a problem that comes from the history of Blacks in America. Other ethnic groups arrived in America with a cultural heritage but slavery stripped Blacks (African-Americans) of a cultural attachment with Africa. It is rather unfortunate that Richburg has chosen to denigrate Africa and its people because of his own personal and historical experience.

### **Lessons and Challenges**

As distasteful as this book may be to Africans, there are lessons to be learned from it. Richburg has clearly pointed fingers at the conditions that make Africa inhospitable - the corrupt governments, the civil unrests, the ugliness and wars. Although these are well documented facts that scholars have shown in their work, it is about time that Africans and African governments woke up to deal with the global perceptions of the continent and to work to make it hospitable and safe for all those who call it home and visitors who come to see its wonders and beauty. Randle Robinson and a host of other African-American have paved the way for the continuous engagement of bad governments in Africa. He has made the international community aware of African-American interests in Africa. His efforts must be sustained and emulated. African-Americans must see themselves as the conduits for the necessary changes in Africa - stability, investment, positive engagement which are paramount in bringing the countries of Africa to the position of achieving prosperity. Ron Brown, the former Secretary of Commerce (now deceased) , saw the need for investing in Africa and the necessity for sustainable development. Keith Richburg's book is recommended to the general public as a volume that exposes the present day African condition and the perceptions of Africa and Africans by others outside the continent.

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