2. Disenchanting Africa

The two travel narratives on which this chapter focuses, *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992) by writer Eddy L. Harris and *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (1997) by journalist Keith Richburg, present a sharp contrast to the works discussed in the previous chapter. This is not just because Harris and Richburg narrate much longer stays in Africa—Harris traveled for almost one year through more than twenty different countries and Richburg spent three years as a foreign correspondent for the *Washington Post* in Africa—but also because they reflect a different vision of the continent. The travel narratives by Harris and Richburg are representative of a strand in Black travel writing that developed in the late twentieth century, which approaches the African continent with far greater skepticism, if not rejection, compared with the previously analyzed works. The sentiments of African Americans toward Africa transformed in the post-civil-rights period and post-independence period when the hopes associated with the era of decolonization and independence in Africa began to fade. Especially in the last decade of the twentieth century, pivotal changes occurred on the African continent that influenced the perception of Africa by the diaspora. While the early 1990s presented a period of optimism and anticipation—Nelson Mandela was released from prison after almost three decades and propelled the end of Apartheid in South Africa, civil wars ceased, and dictator regimes declined—over the course of the decade, drastic changes occurred: these included the annulment of a democratic election in Nigeria, the war in Somalia after a failed United Nations' peacekeeping intervention, genocide in Rwanda, the outbreaks of diseases, and the spreading of violence and corruption (Campbell 365-66).

Although Black travel writing before and during the mid-twentieth century reflects a desire to connect with Africa and Africans—after all, Afrocentric sentiments demanded a positive depiction of the continent and the display of solidarity with the oppressed global Black community—a considerable number of works of the post-civil-rights era foreground Black travelers' disillusionment with the continent. They demonstrate that unfulfilled expectations—in other words, an unsuccessful homecoming or failed return—cause disappointment and often lead to a radical deconstruction of the myth of Africa as the Black diaspora's home. It is important to note, however, that such sentiments were not completely new and are expressed in earlier texts as well. To be certain, "the history of black American returns to Africa is replete with

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cases of disappointment, alienation, and even revulsion," as Christine Levecq observes (90). For example, Wright's *Black Power* illustrates its author's inability to connect with Africa and understand the people he encountered. Wright's exclamation that he had understood nothing underscores his estrangement and alienation from the continent and his African origins (see ch. III, sec. 3.3).

Travel writers of the post-civil-right era, as Michelle Commander notes, "tend to focus more narrowly on the ruptures in their explorations of the role of Africa in the returnee's sense of self" and "have begun to complicate return narratives by openly discussing their journeys even when their stances are in flux and they question the viability of their diasporic visions concerning return" (58). To understand this change in perception, the historical context also needs to be considered: Travelers such as Harris and Richburg as well as other journalists and foreign correspondents, such as Lynne Duke and Howard French who also wrote book-length accounts of their experiences in Africa, were all born in the 1950s and traveled to Africa as relatively privileged US citizens and well-situated tourists or professionals. In contrast to earlier generations, they grew up with more liberties and increased opportunities for societal and political participation (Campbell 367). Moreover, African Americans engaged little with African politics and the postcolonial realities (the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa being the exception) during this time (371). Despite the frequent invocation of Africa as a homeland in Black American intellectual and popular discourses and the self-designation "African American" that emerged in the 1980s, "Americans of African descent were not claiming identity with contemporary Africans as much as reclaiming their own ancestral past—in Haley's terms, their roots" (370, 371).

The subtitles of the travel narratives by Harris and Richburg announce the authors' position regarding questions of identification. Their self-delineation as 'Black men' and 'Black Americans' capitalizes on the authors' distinct perspective as *Black* American but not *African* American travelers. They dismiss 'Africa' as a source of identification and instead seek to affirm their American cultural identity. While the works by Obama and Washington serve to discursively ingrain the narrator in an African context and to construct roots to an ancestral homeland, Harris and Richburg reject the idea of having meaningful ties to the continent. Their travel narratives, as I will show in the following, deconstruct idealized images of diasporic homecoming and disenchant the myths surrounding Africa. More precisely, Harris presents an ambiguous vision of Africa, whereas Richburg's paints an unflinchingly bleak picture. Both travel narratives, however, demonstrate that the image of Africa they con-

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struct reveals little about the actual geographical and political entity and says much more about the writer's attitude, assumptions, and purposes.

2.1 Eddy L. Harris's *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992)

> [T]ravel involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space, [and] all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed.
>
> —*Carl Thompson, Travel Writing*

By the time *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (1992) appeared, Eddy L. Harris had already published *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (1988), a travel narrative about his journey down the Mississippi River in a canoe; he would later write another travel account titled *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride Through Slavery's Old Backyard* (1993), a book about his motorcycle trip through the Southern United States. All three narratives place special emphasis on questions of identity in relation to place. In *Native Stranger*, Harris explores this issue as he travels alone across the African continent for almost a year by plane, bus, train, car, boat, and foot, encountering different peoples and traditions. The travelogue recounts Harris's journey through Africa and the many fleeting acquaintances with people he meets by chance and who invite him into their homes, making him a witness to the generosity, contentment, poverty, and despair of the people. Harris also scrutinizes government corruption, the enduring legacies of European colonialism, and the complex relationship between African nations to their former colonizers.

The ambiguous and oxymoronic title *Native Stranger* captures Harris's ambivalence toward Africa. Twisting the theme of the classic works to which his title refers—namely, Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), both of which explore the Black experience United and the condition of being a native of the country, while simultaneously being excluded and marginalized—the travel narrative foregrounds Harris's conflicting feelings of familiarity and foreignness. Harris demonstrates how his 'Americanness' makes him a stranger in Africa, despite the fact that his Blackness and his heritage could render him native in this place. As Commander observes, "To be a native stranger for Harris, then, is to have a sense of being from a place but not of that place. It is the state of being an outsider

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within, someone in limbo, a constant wanderer" (60). From the position of the 'outsider within,' Harris negotiates his connection to Africa. As my analysis illustrates, the travelogue presents highly ambiguous and increasingly negative images of Africa. Ultimately, Harris's travel experiences cause him to reject mythical notions of Africa nurtured in the Black imagination, leaving him disillusioned with the continent. Africa and African people are presented as the cultural other against which the narrator identifies himself and which are employed to assert his American national identity.

The structure of the book follows the itinerary of Harris's journey, beginning with his departure from Paris, where he resided at the time, followed by his sojourn through numerous African nations from North to South. What characterizes Harris's travel narrative are the intimate and often sensuous descriptions of the places he visits, the attention to detail, the nuanced meditations on the interpersonal relationships with the people he meets, and the self-reflexive comments on his assumptions and perceptions. Through his traveling, and by extension his travel writing, Harris seeks to acquire a better sense of self and recognizes that the exploration of foreign landscapes and people really serves the purpose of discovering more about himself. As for so many other Black travelers, the journey to Africa is for Harris "a personal quest for understanding" (*Native Stranger* 34), an opportunity to learn and discover more about himself. Traveling across the continent, the narrator believes, would have transformative effects on him and would facilitate a better understanding of who he is: "I had some eerie feeling Africa could teach me about life [...] so that I could *see myself* better and better *define myself*" (27; emphasis added). Accordingly, the project of self-exploration continues on the level of the text, and travel writing functions as a means to probe different subject positions on African ground. To arrive at "a better understanding of place and self" (35), the narrator explores the meaning of Africa, pairing his ambiguous notions of the continent with established discourses on Africa.

Another characteristic of Harris's travelogue is the ambivalence with which he approaches Africa in his writing. Early in the narrative, he recalls various Western and Africanist discourses about Africa and thus begins his journey with an emotional and conceptual confrontation with Africa. The narrator signals his awareness of the influence these discourses have on his relationship with Africa. From the very beginning of the narrative and the outset of Harris's project to understand Africa and himself better, he acknowledges that premediated and prefigurated images of the continent complicate his aim when he writes, "Long before I ever went there Africa

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was alive in my imagination" (*Native Stranger* 14). He recognizes that his own notions of Africa are shaped by "images from books," "newspapers and magazines," and "residual history learned in school" and that these visions of Africa influence his complicated and problematic aim "to find the truths of Africa" (25). Before Harris embarks on his journey across Africa, he recalls and contrasts different discourses surrounding the continent that have been formed over decades, not least in the genre of travel writing. The contemplation of diverse visions of Africa signals the narrator's self-reflexive engagement with such discourses and draws attention to the difficulties inherent in representing the continent. Moreover, the competing visions of Africa that Harris recalls reflect his conflicting emotions—ranging from anxiety and fear to anticipation and excitement.

Prior to his journey, Harris dreams of Africa and describes it in terms of its tastes, smells, sounds, and movements. The narrator writes,

> The Africa of my dreams tasted of dust and sand and sweat, smelled of heat and dried fish, echoed jungle rhythms and roaring laughter and the sounds of children starving. Cattle rustled in the marketplace and stirred up the dust. Women hurried along a sunbaked road walking barefoot, baskets on their heads, their backs noble and straight as arrows. The stew they rushed home to cook was pungent and vaguely sweet. The meat in their stew was rat. In the dark with my eyes closed, I could hear their children cry. (*Native Stranger* 26)

The passage evokes an image of Africa that is characteristically sensuous. In the narrator's dream, Africa is not merely a picture but a multifaceted experience—something that the narrator can hear, taste, smell, and feel. This panoply of sensation stirs the narrator's imagination. Although the rather idyllic scene described in the above passage is punctuated with the piteous cries of children, the Africa of Harris's dreams is a mysterious and alluring place. The long-standing 'Africa-as-dream' narrative becomes even more pronounced when he professes, "Africa was unknown and mysterious to me, inhabited by pygmy cannibals and Watusi giants […]. Jungles and mountains and infinite plains. […] [S]trange cities with stranger-sounding names rolling magically in the ear" (26). Arousing a vision of Africa as Eden complete with magnificent landscapes and majestic wild animals, the narrator acknowledges his longing to see "African spring," "migrating herds of wildebeest," "lion cubs hiding in the tall grass, baby elephants learning to galumph" (27).

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In between the dream-like evocations of Africa, another, contrasting discourse is recalled that adheres to the myth of Africa as a nightmare (the subtitle of Harris's narrative, '… Heart of Africa,' already alludes to this discourse by recalling Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, 1899). It is an image of Africa that has become fixed within media representations and in the popular imagination of the West:

> Africa is Ethiopian babies with their bellies distended from starvation. […]
> Africa is dread and terror and worse. Africa is mosquitos.
> Africa is AIDS and malaria, river blindness and something called green monkey disease.
> Africa is death and darkness and flies. (*Native Stranger* 26)

The nightmarish visions of Africa are rendered in a detached, matter-of-fact style and in short, staccato sentences without the ornamental mode and sensual descriptions that are employed in the previous passage. Notably, there is a tense switch from past to present. Using the present tense to describe Africa as a nightmare world and to convey images of suffering, terror, disease, and death could suggest that the narrator perceives this version of the continent as more current and authentic than the images of his dreams.

Already in the very beginning and before the actual journey is retold, contrasting images of Africa are presented that encompass different cultural narratives of the continent, Westernized discourses, and the narrator's own desires, dreams, and experiences. The evocation of multifarious visions of Africa synthesizes the diverging, contradictory, and ambivalent meanings of the space in the cultural imagination. These contrasting perceptions of the continent as a dream and nightmare illuminate the ambiguity surrounding depictions of Africa and point to Harris's ambivalent feelings. Both discourses, often inextricably interwoven with one another, inform the way the narrator approaches Africa and shape his expectations. Retrospectively and from the vantage point of an experienced traveler who has acquired new knowledge and who has been changed by the journey, the narrator brings together the different images of Africa and his actual experiences. The result is an image of Africa that is remarkably abstract and fluid and that sharply contrasts the other images of the continent:

> The Africa in my dreams and the Africa I remember, now that I have been there, come together and diverge to form crisscrossing patterns of texture and color, light and shadow, like a *haunting abstract work of art* that domi-

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> nates corners of the imagination, *a tapestry weaving itself out of what is real and what is pure imagination*, a tapestry whose *colors and cultures collide and overlap*, changing from country to country, religion to religion, from place to place and village to village. (*Native Stranger* 18; emphasis added)

The description of Africa as an abstract work of art points to the impossibility of representing Africa in a true and objective manner—something that travel narratives have traditionally purported to do. In this regard, the narrative undermines the genre's truth claim. It also highlights the narrator's own inability to judge what is true and what is imagined, underscoring the challenge of depicting and making sense of Africa.

Calling attention to his subject position as a Black American traveler, Harris introduces yet another vision of Africa—namely, that of an imagined homeland for Black diasporic people. Contemplating the idea of an African homeland and its powerful grip on his imagination, he insists that "[a] black man cannot visit Africa without such thoughts creeping upon him and altering the panorama" (*Native Stranger* 27). According to Harris, the vision of Africa as "a place of wonder, a place of return, […] a place filled with promises of black dignity and rich with a sense of belonging" (106) infiltrates Black people's attitudes toward the continent. His statement that "the specter of Africa looms like the shadow of a genie, dormant but not altogether harmless" (13), suggests that he perceives the idea of Africa as home and a place of return as confining. The apparent impossibility to free oneself from this idea, he fears, thwarts his project of self-exploration.

Trying to escape the prefigured plots and routes, *Native Stranger* pits itself against the trope of return and homecoming that one finds in earlier works, such as Haley's *Roots* and Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*.[7] In fact, Harris debunks the idea from the very beginning. Addressing the implied reader directly, he opens his narrative by stating plainly, "Because my skin is black you will say I traveled Africa to find the roots of my race. I did not" (*Native Stranger* 13). That the narrator is not concerned with tracing his

7 The narrator emphasizes that his journey is not a search for roots like that of Haley when he states, "I was not trying to find the village that had once been home to my people, nor would I stand and talk to people who could claim to be my relatives, as Haley had done. […] My Africanism was abstract and I wanted it to remain so. I did not need to hear the names of my ancient ancestors or know what they looked like" (*Native Stranger* 138). Rather than trying to discover concrete connections to people, he views his connection to Africa as merely symbolic, as something that is tied to the past.

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personal roots back to the continent, searching for distant relatives, or engaging thoroughly with the historical connection between Africans and African Americans is made sufficiently clear early on. He recognizes that the past continuous to shape the Black American experience when he writes, "The chains of slavery weighed heavily upon us" (107). And although he sees the unique historical and sociocultural experiences of Black Americans in the United States as significant for determining Black cultural identity, he perceives this history as a burden (Hållén 6). He writes, "Perhaps, then, by going to Africa I could see the past and then get rid of it, shed myself of this *roots* business once and for all, those individual shackles that chain us too often to the past" (*Native Stranger* 28). Contrary to many roots seekers, who wish to discover stories of origin that (re)connect them to the past and fill the gaps of knowledge caused by slavery, Harris perceives the past as a weight from which he tries to free himself. That Harris views the past as a burden and not something worth exploring in depth is also reflected in the narrative, which focuses on the here and now. Instead of delving into the histories of the countries he visits, the narrative is concerned with Harris's travel experiences.

While the wish to discover more about oneself while traveling pertains to countless travelers, Harris's motivation to see and define himself better derives from the complex condition of being Black in America; a motivation for traveling that he shares with numerous other Black travelers. Being Black *and* American, Harris carries "two cultural passports"—one passport is "stamped with European culture and sensibilities and history," "[t]he other was issued from the uniquely black experience" (*Native Stranger* 28). The metaphor of the two cultural passports is employed to describe his struggle to reconcile the conflicting feelings of connection and disconnection that he has toward Africa. However, rather than offering the narrator novel insights into his relationship to the continent and the people he encounters, he experiences the distinct cultural and racial perspective or sensibility as confining: "Somewhere between the blackness of my skin and the whiteness of my culture I am trapped" (106). Many Black travel writers address similar conflicting sentiments and attitudes, unveiling their ambivalent feelings toward the places and people they visit. However, observations concerning such ambivalence often either conclude a travel narrative or are only briefly discussed and then cast aside. By contrast, *Native Stranger* takes these contradictions and ambivalences as the starting point of its author's literary journey. Nicklas Hållén emphasizes that "what sets Harris's case apart from many similar accounts of travels in Africa is the fact that the text centres on and actively engages with

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its internal conflicts and contradictions" (13-14). While, for instance, Obama's *Dreams* flattens out the contradictions and ambiguities surrounding his affiliation with Kenyans and Kenyan culture that arise during his journey, Harris's narrative foregrounds the negotiations of familiarity and estrangement. In this sense, the contradictions Harris observes in Africa and within himself find their way into the narrative.

To find out what Africa means to him and to discover its 'truths,' the narrator seeks to free himself from the prefigured visions of Africa—as dream, nightmare, or homeland—that nag at his consciousness and 'creep upon him' to alter his perspective and distort his impressions. How, the text seems to ask, can one explore the self in relation to place without pre-established assumptions and beliefs stemming from one's cultural and social background. For the narrator the answer lies in the way in which he travels and how he approaches Africa: Alone and without a fixed itinerary, predefined destination, or plan, he wants to venture away from the beaten track and immerse himself in the places and cultures he encounters. He seeks to practice what Hulme describes as the travel writer's "deep immersion" that involves the acquisition of intimate knowledge of "people and places unknown to short-stay travellers, let alone tourists" ("Travelling to Write" 97). For Harris, travel entails "walk[ing] a mile in another's moccasins to see what other men endure and to endure it with them" (*Native Stranger* 43) as a sign of solidarity and empathy. This involves, for instance, fasting during Ramadan while he is in Tunisia—"When I am in Tunisia, I do as the Tunisians" (41)—as well as the sharing of food and shelter with strangers. Throughout his journey, Harris emphasizes his desire "to be African for a while," "to shed [his] former self as if it were a snakeskin and see life, if possible, from a new point of view" (35). This intent reveals his relativistic outlook, open-mindedness, and willingness to expose himself to different experiences; but it also reveals his appropriative attitude and assimilatory engagement with other cultures that expose his privileged position as a Western traveler. Yet, it is his search for the things that people share, a common bond or sentiment, that distinguishes his travel practice from that of the tourists he observes. His self-fashioning as a traveler, he believes, allows for a sustained engagement with Africa and a better understanding of the continent and its people. Therefore, Harris tries to disassociate his journey from the adventure and romance of (roots) tourism.

This supposedly easy dichotomy between travel and tourism points to a range of underlying cultural assumptions, values, and prejudices that ascribe a certain superiority, intellectually and ethically, to the traveler—as opposed

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to the tourist (Kinsley 237). While the notion of travel purports to grant more authentic experiences, Graham Huggan argues "that there is no meaningful distinction between the tourist and the traveler"—such a differentiation is artificial and prone to stereotypes (5). As Zoë Kinsley points out, the traveler-writer's insistence on being a traveler and not a tourist "is often a claim for individualism, a rejection of sameness" (238) and "encapsulates the traveller's desire to be different and individual, both in travel practice and text" (240). This desire manifests in Harris's wish to depart from the beaten track and carve out new paths for his travels as well as for the way he writes about his journey. Divorcing his travel from the tourist journey and the notion of inauthenticity that is attached to it, the narrator emphasizes his intent to take an unbiased look at Africa. He seeks out routes, modes of travel, and textual paths that allow him to view Africa, as well as himself, from a fresh perspective and through an untainted lens. This idealistic endeavor, however, is continually put to the test. As I outline in the following, over the course of his journey his resolution not to judge Africa purely by his own Western standards—and from his personal, cultural, or racial perspective—dissolves; eventually, he experiences an increasing sense of disillusionment and pessimism.

Initially, the narrator establishes his travel practice in opposition to the tourist journey by avoiding the paths of the tourists he encounters on his journey, proclaiming, "When they turned left […], I turned right" (*Native Stranger* 43). The conscious physical and ideological separation from the clichéd figure of the tourist allows Harris to critically examine the implications of Western tourism in Africa. For example, he points to the power hierarchies and racial inequalities inherent in tourist businesses and notes that these differences stem from a colonial mentality (131). Only by divorcing himself from the position of the tourist can Harris declare, "I hate tourists for the same reason I hate Coca-Cola. They make every corner of the world a little more American" (71). Pairing Western tourists with America's corporate giant Coca-Cola, the narrator assumes a critical perspective on Western tourism as a form of neo-colonialism. Throughout the text and throughout Harris's journey, Coca-Cola reappears as a symbol, embodying American cultural imperialism, or coca-colonization as it has been dubbed. Predictably, the narrator can only temporarily erase his ties to the hegemonic culture as he himself is undeniably a representative of the international tourist industry and the neocolonial power structures behind it. Over the course of the journey, then, the supposedly straightforward distinction between traveler and tourist dissolves. Although the narrator is determined to stick to his idealistic premise

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to approach Africa as a traveler—trying to "shed the snakeskin of assumptions and expectations and sensibilities of the world I come from" (188)—he recognizes time and again that he has much more in common with the tourists he disdains than with the local Africans. The narrator's inability to cast off his assumptions, expectations, and sensibilities is reflected by his craving for Coca-Cola, the drink that epitomizes the American way of life like few others. Harris admits that "Coca-Cola is as soothing as the sudden sound of English in a faraway place" and that "[i]t tastes like home" (72). When he experiences frustration, exhaustion, and disappointment during his journey, he succumbs to his craving for the 'taste of home' and eagerly gulps down cans of coke. Descriptions of his mounting thirst in the unbearable heat can thus be read as a metaphor for Harris's growing frustration, his disillusionment with Africa, and his identification and affiliation with American culture. Unable to uphold the distinction between traveler and tourist, the narrator notes self-reflexively that he too is just another American tourist. He thus admits, "You want to remove yourself from these people, call yourself a traveler, but you can't. You and they are one. You and Coca-Cola are one" (72). Harris's dilemma is underscored by the collapse of the traveler/tourist dichotomy.

The contradictions inherent in Harris's project of self-exploration as well as in his descriptions of Africa are manifested in a scene where he visits Gorée Island, which served as a slave-trading station between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries and is located off the coast of Senegal; it is among the premier pilgrimage destinations of Black diasporic roots seekers and heritage tourists. The visit brings the narrator closer to what can be considered a geography that embodies the roots of the Black diaspora and may thus have been framed as a homecoming. For the narrator, however, this is not an emotional return or homecoming. Rather than exploring personal connections and feelings toward the place, the narrator presents an account which, as one scholar observes, is "rife with contradictions [and] demonstrates the narrator's ambivalence" (Bennett 13). Approaching Gorée Island from the water, Harris takes in the view: "Out in the harbor Gorée Island sits like a scab on the smooth skin of the evening sea, raised like a welt, ugly and dark in the distance and misshapen. In daylight and up close the island is as pretty and precious as a prize, its low buildings glimmering faintly pink in the newly risen sun" (*Native Stranger* 123). The gruesome image of the island as a scab on the sea's skin in the pending darkness of the evening—which alludes to a wound caused by the transatlantic slave trade that has not yet healed—stands in stark contrast to the picture that presents itself to the narrator in daylight. During the day,

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the place is transformed into an aesthetically pleasing sight of bright colors, meshing together the blue of the sea and the sky, the green of the plants, and the red of the flowers. This observation appears to unnerve the narrator because no obvious marker draws attention to the history of the island and its slave cells. What follows the visual observation of the island is a brief account of its past, which is described as "a river of blood. A river of tears. A river of history" (123), and a short recollection of the history of the slave trade and the Middle Passage. Supporting the argument that Harris is not overly concerned with discovering and engaging with the past and the history of the slave trade, his account is hastily concluded with the narrator noting that the slave cells on the island are "monuments to a history long forgotten" (125).

Overall, Harris's account of his visit to "the most substantial symbol of his return—one of the most significant sites that legitimizes the word *native* in this text's title" (Commander 62)—is written in a detached, impersonal style. This lack of personal commentary and emotional response evinces a break in an otherwise highly personal, emotive, and self-reflective account and comes as a surprise considering the significance of the place for diasporic travelers. Intriguingly, the meaning of Gorée Island as a symbolic place of return for the Black diaspora is downplayed. On the one hand, the scene serves to express the narrator's ambivalence to the continent that is manifested in the descriptions of the landscape, the contrasting images of the Gorée Island, and in the change of the narrative style, which suggests Harris's insecurity of how to interpret the place. On the other hand, it functions to deconstruct the myth of homecoming because this symbolic point of departure for the Black diaspora does not evoke overwhelming emotions and feelings—such as loss, grief, and anger or forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing—in the narrator.

Although Harris's initial intent is to approach Africa unbiased and free from preconceived ideas about the continent—he repeats, mantra-like, that "[i]t is folly to judge this place by standards that are so foreign to Africa" (*Native Stranger* 278)—he increasingly judges the people, their behavior, and traditions according to his own cultural and personal standards. While his judgments are not always directly articulated, the narrator's opinions surface through the commentary. Several incidents illuminate his inability to refrain from such personal judgment. For example, his observations of veil-wearing Mzabite women in Ghardaïa, Algeria, are rendered in an account that purports to be objective and mindful of the traditions and the cultural value of the veil. However, he seems unable to fend off judgment when he describes the veiled women as being "*ancient* in their ways" (59; emphasis added) and

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"cock[ing] their heads awkwardly like birds searching for worms" (60). The portrayal of the veiled women as 'ancient' and 'awkward' exemplifies the narrator's perception of the tradition as dispensable, stuck in time, and lacking progress. Making his position more explicit, the narrator poses the following rhetorical question: "how liberating can it be when a woman is forced to stumble along with one arm carrying the groceries or a baby, the other hand holding the veil closed?" (60). Harris frequently recalls his initial endeavor and reminds himself of the necessity of accepting the customs and traditions he observes without judgment. Yet, when he argues with a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali about patriarchal structures and female circumcision, which Harris condemns as an "idiotic ritual" (215), a shift in attitude can be registered. Apparently, Harris discards his cultural relativism approach and instead declares that there are universal values that every culture has to cherish: "But aren't there some absolutes in life that have nothing to do with cultures and only with humanity? Poverty. Dignity. Equality" (216). The question unveils his belief in the existence of universal human rights and values that are not to be negotiated. Abandoning the premise to accept the traditions and customs of the cultures he encounters, he then suggests that such an approach might even be inhuman and dangerous: "A traveler ought to be sensitive to the other cultures and customs he encounters, for they are often very fragile, but for the sake of *nothing* ought a man abandon his humanness" (236).

As Harris progresses, his journey becomes more taxing and challenging as he tries to hold on to his premise to adapt to the ways of life he encounters, to endure the hardships of the people he meets, and to submit to the forces he cannot or should not try to control. His endeavor is accompanied by notions of surrender, self-abandonment, submission, and the relinquishment of self-control:

> If I was going to travel like a leaf on a breeze, letting myself be guided by whim and wind and rumor, feeling the helplessness the Africans feel, then I would need to surrender to the caprices of nature and also of authority. My life suddenly was not my own. I found myself sitting in the lap of gods, the lap of destiny, and the lap of authority. (*Native Stranger* 174)

That this initial aim to surrender to authority and travel at the mercy of nature and God is prone to failure and set up for disappointment is quite obvious considering that Harris declared his belief in individual responsibility and agency earlier in the narrative when he states, "Our lives are our own, and what we make of the world is our fault and our responsibility" (153). As

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he travels through Africa, adhering to his self-imposed rules, the narrator increasingly suffers under the climate, the unswerving heat, and the deprivation and hardships that stem from the lack of clean water, electricity, and food. Hence, anger and frustration increasingly build up in the narrator as he witnesses misery, despair, and hopelessness all around him. Appalled by the abject poverty he sees and the beggars asking for money, the narrator concedes, "I was tired of being seen as some savior. The African poverty was at last getting to me" (177). Moreover, being perceived as the well-situated American traveler that he is causes Harris to become suspicious of the hospitality extended to him, leading him to question the underlying motives of strangers who invite him into their home. His own powerlessness to change things and the helplessness he feels when faced with the pain and anguish of people drive him to the edge of what he can bear. While in Mali, an incident with a begging woman carrying a child profoundly unsettles the narrator. The woman's poverty and despair elicit feelings of shame and guilt in Harris. He concludes that no matter how much money he gives to the people, he will never be able to end their misery. For Harris, the begging woman and her child embody the pain, hopelessness, and helplessness he begins to see almost everywhere he goes, which brings him to the verge of despair. He literally flees from this scene of unbearable suffering and flies out of the country the next day—a response that can be read as an attempt to forge a physical and emotional distance between him and the suffering people (217-18).

Over the course of Harris's journey, Africa loses the magic and his descriptions of places and people become increasingly bleak. Before venturing on his journey, the magical and strange-sounding names of cities incited his curiosity. Yet, as he travels through Burkina Faso, he finds that "[t]here is magic in the African place-names, but there is none in the air. There is nothing magical anymore in the rutted roads and the dying sheep or the dust in the eyes and throat" (*Native Stranger* 266). His statement blatantly underscores his disillusionment with Africa. The travelogue thus demystifies the continent as a place of magic and wonder by constructing an image of Africa as a site of hopelessness, poverty, and despair. The narrator also debunks notions of return and belonging, which he regarded with skepticism from the very beginning. He explains his frustration and his disappointment by saying that he has come too close to Africa and that he has seen too much that led to the continent's disenchantment: "When you get too close to a thing, it loses its magic" (266). During a boat trip in Zaire (the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo), the narrator ultimately discards whatever notions of

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Africa as a mythical homeland he might still have harbored and endorses his estrangement from African people, noticing once more that he has more in common with his White fellow travelers than with the Africans who look like him. When the captain of the boat tells him to move to Zaire, which he frames as Harris's symbolic African home, and to help the country grow and develop, the narrator unceremoniously responds: "I could never live in Africa […]. I had been here too long already" (299). When the captain counters and asks if he prefers to live among Whites, the people whose "ancestors stole your ancestors from this place and took them to America as slaves" (300), the narrator—in a provocative gesture—turns to his White English travel companion to thank him. By doing so, he implies that he is indeed grateful that his ancestors were taken from Africa. Consequently, Harris concludes this episode with the words, "The spell was broken" (300), thus indicating that he has banished the mythical images of Africa that infiltrated his attitude toward the continent.

Harris's discontent with his journey, and by extension with Africa, is manifested in the portrayal of the places and peoples he encounters. For example, employing sweeping generalizations, he characterizes Africans as "patient and acquiescent" (*Native Stranger* 279), helpless and submissive to authority (207, 281), and as having "no tradition of democracy and self-assertion" (174). Drawing on Africanist discourse, he repeatedly states that they "simply have no voice" (175)—echoing Isaiah Washington's proclamations. Harris argues that the lack of democracy and agency, which he views as a consequence of Western colonization, makes Africans submissive to authority. Examining the enduring influence of former colonial powers in Africa, the narrator employs the metaphor of slavery to talk about the continent's "continued colonial—or neocolonial—ties to the old slave master" (122). He postulates that because of the West's continuous intervention, Africa was never left alone and allowed "to be what it was, what it could have been, what it ought to be" (213). This leads him to the conclusion—which may be understood as a message addressed to the reader—that the future of Africa and that of the West are inextricably tied together. Suggesting that Africa will remain dependent on the West because of the continent's inability to sustain itself without foreign involvement, he declares, "Africa's work remains. And ours too" (315). What exactly this work entails and what future he foresees for the continent is not explained; thus his statement remains purely rhetorical. What does become sufficiently clear, however, is that Harris does not see himself becoming personally involved

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with Africa and that he rejects taking on any kind of responsibility. Instead, he gestures to the economic responsibility and political influence of the West.

The narrative's final description of Africa combines Harris's personal observations and stereotypical images of the continent. While he signaled his awareness of the implications of Western discourse about Africa at the beginning of his narrative by recalling these discourses, they are now rather uncritically employed in his own descriptions. In an impressionistic account of how he perceives Africa, Harris summarizes, "There is Africa the cliché, Africa the postcard view. Africa is a Biafran baby," "AIDS," "Africa is traditions that will not allow it to move forward," "Africa is joy in spite of the pain," "Africa is incredible generosity" (*Native Stranger* 312). He ends the enumeration by writing, "Africa is. . . ." (312). Unable to reach a conclusion, Africa remains contradictory and potentially confusing to Harris. The ellipses at the end of the passage signal the narrator's inability to make sense of it. His ambivalent feelings toward Africa—oscillating between fascination and revulsion—are expressed by the multiplicity of images that comprise his descriptions of the continent. His project of self-exploration played out on African terrain thus appears futile, as was already anticipated in the very beginning of the narrative. Therefore, at the end of his journey and his travelogue, much is left unresolved: "After almost a year in Africa, I have no answers. Only this one question remains: *Who am I?*" (311). Having found no answer to his question, he acknowledges that "[i]f you cannot know yourself, how can you expect to know a place like Africa? You can't" (311). He thus admits that "Africa brings out the contradictions in the traveler" (312), revealing his awareness that his account of Africa, which is itself contradictory and ambivalent, reveals more about himself than about the continent.

Over the course of the journey, it has become clear to Harris that Africa plays only a minor symbolic role in his conception of self. Harris does not identify with Africa and repudiates affiliations to African people by emphasizing a perceived cultural divide. Stressing the importance of Western cultural values such as individualism, order, and material comfort and juxtaposing them to the disorder and submissiveness that he believes characterize Africa and its people leads him to the conclusion that there is nothing that connects him to Africa: "I do not feel part of this place, it's true, nor a part of these people simply because of an accident of birth. I am not one of them" (*Native Stranger* 313). The narrator defines his selfhood in explicit opposition to what he claims characterizes African people. Interestingly, the differences between African people and Harris are initially charted in superficial terms;

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at the beginning of his journey, the narrator comments on how his appearance and physical characteristics set him apart from the people in Tunis: "I am tall and I am very dark. I have not shaved my beard and there is not another beard in the city. I wear clothes that set me apart and attract attention […]. My clothes are not African clothes. […] My walk is not an African walk" (35-36). Harris's height, skin tone, and beard as well as his clothes and the way he walks visually mark him as an outsider. He is not just perceived as a *stranger* but also as being *strange* (35), attracting shy glances or open stares from people in the streets. By contrast, toward the end of his journey, the difference between Africans and Harris is no longer registered in terms of outward appearance but in terms of character, behavior, customs, and culture. Reversing his earlier claim that his appearance marks him as a stranger, he now recognizes basic similarities between him and the local people; however, he emphasizes their fundamental difference: After almost one year of traveling across Africa, he remarks, "I am sitting alone, surrounded by *dark strangers* who call me brother […]. I am isolated, not really one of them. […] We share little more than the color of our skin and the fact of our humanness" (285; emphasis added). Having journeyed through Africa, Harris's perception of self and others has changed. He no longer considers himself the stranger but instead attributes this 'strangeness' to the people he encounters, thus perpetuating the stereotype of African strangeness.

Notably, Africa serves as the contrastive foil against which Harris asserts his American identity. Emphasizing his individuality, Harris reinstates a firm sense of difference between him and African people and commits fully to his Americanized perspective. The exposure to cultural otherness through travel confirms his identity as an American, causing him to claim the appellation 'Black American' and reject the signifier 'African' altogether. He asserts that there is too much that separates him from Africa to call himself an *African* American. Underscoring the cultural gap between himself and the local people, the narrator foregrounds his desire for unconstrained mobility—which he depicts as a distinct feature of his 'Americanness'—and contrasts it to the immobility that he believes to be a defining trait of 'Africanness.' Harris thus constructs the United States as a space of unrestrained mobility, ignoring the way Black mobility is circumscribed in his home country, both literally and symbolically (see ch. II, sec. 1). Accordingly, Harris's mobility is represented as a sign of his Americanness, which is articulated when he states, "I will go home to *my world* […]. I will *drive the road* as far as my eye can see and beyond. There will be *no roadblocks to stop me*. No one will ask me for my identity papers.

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And the *roads will be good*. / When I'm tired of *driving*, an *airplane* will be waiting to *fly* me somewhere else" (*Native Stranger* 313; emphasis added). It is clear, then, that for Harris being American encompasses the right to travel freely and with a certain level of comfort. Fashioning himself as an independent, individualistic, and mobile American, Harris accentuates the divide between himself and African people.

In contrast to Harris's descriptions of the United States and his Americanness, Africa is constructed in the narrative as a space inhabited by immobilized people, where free movement is restricted and discouraged. Paradoxically, despite the fact that he traverses much of the continent and visits over twenty different countries, the narrator feels that his mobility is heavily limited in Africa (for example, he points to the difficulties he experienced when crossing borders from one country to another). Consequently, notions of stillness and immobility are ascribed to Africans: "Their lives are not their own. They *sit* in the laps of the gods. Destiny and fate are held always in the hands of someone else. They *sit* and they *wait*. They *wait* for rain. They *wait* for salvation. They *wait* for God. They have been *waiting forever*" (*Native Stranger* 148; emphasis added). The repetitive sentence structure functions to underscore the alleged monotony of African life and the lack of agency, which frustrates the narrator. Significantly, Africans are described as passive, immobile, and submissive, which is stressed by the repetition of the verbs 'to sit' and 'to wait.' Although Harris acknowledges that much of what he criticizes "is a product of colonial servitude" (313) and the imbalanced relationship between former colonizers and African governments, he also implies that the problem is rooted in the character, or nature, of Africans who lack individual determination.[8] 'African immobility,' for Harris, represents an antithesis to the progress and modernity of the West. Clearly, by associating Africa with immobility, backwardness, dependence, helplessness, passivity, and submissiveness, the narrative echoes the stereotypes created by imperial discourses about the continent.

Native Stranger embodies several traits that have been identified as recurring motifs and strategies used in Black travel writing. Its imbrication with Africanist discourse illustrates the travel-writer's failure to escape the limited

8 Suggesting that there must be some flaw in the character of the African people, the narrator wonders, "is it the African character or the colonial presence that defines the way Africa is? The colonials clearly have not left, and Africa asserts its own authority any way it can. And Africans readily submit to authority" (*Native Stranger* 174).

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and prefigured visions of Africa. Moreover, it underscores the contention that Africa serves as a terrain upon which travelers negotiate their identity in relation to both the United States and Africa. Harris is an example of a traveler who reaffirms his national identity by defining himself in contrast to Africa. In this regard, his travelogue shares similarities with Keith Richburg's travel narrative, to which I turn next.

2.2 Keith Richburg's *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (1997)

> This is Africa. These are just bodies dumped into a river. Hundreds. Thousands. No one will ever count. […] Because this is Africa, and they don't count the bodies in Africa.
>
> —*Keith Richburg, Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*

> Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book.
>
> —*Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write about Africa"*

Keith Richburg's journalistic travel narrative *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* is a record of his experiences in Africa in the early 1990s where he worked as *The Washington Post*'s bureau chief in Nairobi, Kenya. Richburg traveled extensively across the continent in his role as a foreign correspondent and spent his three years in Africa covering, among other topics, the United Nations intervention in Somalia, the AIDS pandemic, and the Rwandan genocide. What characterizes Richburg's controversially received book are the reports on military coups, genocide, and dictatorships that depict Africa as a continent mired in an ongoing cycle of violence, corruption, poverty, bloodshed, and suffering. However, according to the praise for *Out of America* that is reprinted on the first two pages, it is "a dead-on portrait of a continent mired in misery and violence" (*Newsweek*), "a salutary dose of realism" (*Foreign Affairs*), and "[a] courageous effort to tell the truth" (*Journal of Blacks Higher Education*). While being applauded for his unflinching portrayal of Africa by some reviewers, Richburg's account has also been subject to substantial critique.[9]

9 African American readers attacked Richburg's book arguing that it presents a distorted image of Africa that caters to White audiences. They criticized Richburg's insufficient

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Curiously, it is Eddy L. Harris who, in a review of *Out of America* for *The Los Angeles Times*, criticizes the book for being one-dimensional and presenting "nothing new." Harris asks, "where is the love to balance all that is terrible in this place that Richburg reveals to us?" "[W]here is any shred of hope or trust in an African tomorrow to counter his admitted cynicism?" ("Africa Betrayed"). As the previous analysis of *Native Stranger* has demonstrated, the narrative creates an image of Africa that, albeit ambiguous and multifaceted, is tainted by prejudices. It may well be argued, then, that *Out of America* begins where *Native Stranger* leaves off and that it articulates sentiments that Harris would have felt had he stayed any longer in Africa.

Richburg's account has been described as "a tale of disillusionment" (Campbell 373) and a "chronicle of an unhappy return" (Levecq 82) to Africa. The title of the travel narrative—a nod to Karen Blixen's 1937 memoir *Out of Africa* in which the writer nostalgically remembers a pastoral past, the time she spent in East Africa—already announces a violent "confrontation" with the continent. *Out of America* evokes the all too familiar images of bloodshed, death, and suffering created by early White European travelers, which continuously inform negative depictions of Africa. The view of Africa expressed in the narrative is one that has been disseminated by generations of Western

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historical contextualization of African colonization and asserted that *Out of America* demonstrates the self-hatred of its author. Molefi. K. Asante, a scholar known for his writings on Afrocentricity, states that Richburg's book "is a sad testimony of an individual who is caught in the spiral of psychic pain produced by what Frantz Fanon and Robert C. Smith call *internal inferiorization*. […] He has written a superficial, headline-grabbing attack on the African continent, and many of us who have lived, studied, and travelled in Africa find his book offensive and obscene" (182-83). In the afterword to the 1998 paperback edition of *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (published by Harcourt), Richburg addresses the criticism targeted at him. He situates his work within a tradition of African American travel writing about Africa and points out that writers like Langston Hughes and Eddy L. Harris felt estranged from Africa and African people and used their writing to affirm their American identity. Emphasizing that the sentiments he articulated in the book were not new, he notes that it must be a matter of his tone—too emotional, harsh, and unforgiving—that drew such trenchant criticism (249-51). He notes that, after all, "*Out of America* is first and foremost a journalist's book. It was never intended as an academic tome or a work of political science. It is a personal memoir, a first-person diary […] of my experiences as a reporter" (251). His statement reveals that Richburg was apparently less focused on exploring Africa's complexity—a rather surprising finding given his profession—than on representing himself as an American citizen and being accepted as such. This serves as a reminder that travel writing is employed as a means for self-exploration.

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travel writers. Richburg's account contributes to the perpetuation of the myth of a lost and tainted continent. Its rhetoric and most of his depictions and characterizations of the continent "would fit easily in even the most lurid nineteenth-century Dark Continent travelogue" (Campbell 384). Notably, the book testifies to the persistence and staying power of century-old images of Africa as dark, primitive, and subordinate that are still employed in contemporary travel writing. *Out of America* exemplifies a trait of travel writing about Africa that emerged in the post-colonial period when new themes were inaugurated and old tropes reinvigorated; among "[t]he most important of the new-but-old themes was an emphasis on political dysfunction and social breakdown" (Franey 422). Other monolithic narratives of Africa as a primitive place—economically, politically, and psychologically—and as a continent in need of being saved from self-destruction through the West's benevolent intervention have shaped discourses on Africa in travel narratives (422-23). It has been observed that "Africa remains portrayed as a continent needful of guidance and protection from itself, whether through imperial conquest and exploitation, or rescued by aid packages administered by western governments and non-governmental organization alike" (Fabian 94)—a sentiment that is also articulated at the end of Harris's *Native Stranger* when the narrator concludes that "Africa's work remains. And ours too" (315). Although in more recent writings, "the discourse behind the images and framework regarding western perception of the African 'other'" have transformed—no longer do natural environments supposedly pose a danger as they have in the late nineteenth century—the dangers presented are now inherent in the sociopolitical environments (Fabian 94).

While a number of readers and critics have taken issue with Richburg's descriptions of Africa, to question the veracity of his account and to collate his depictions of the continent with more nuanced and balanced images is not my intention in this analysis. What should be restated, especially with regard to the many reviews of *Out of America* that treat Richburg's travel narrative as an objective and realistic account of a continent in demise, is that "representations produced by travel writers, the techniques they use for their rendering of reality, and their claims to truth, significantly depend on their perceptional perspectives, and on their values, norms, and ideological premises" (Nünning 141). Like all travelers, Richburg carries cultural baggage with him and looks at Africa through specific personal, historical, and cultural lenses. Considering that the narrative certainly tells us less about the actual continent and more about the narrator's own standpoints and ideologies, the goal of my

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analysis is to show how the images of Africa created in the account underscore Richburg's bleak assessment of Africa and support his argument that the continent is irrelevant to him. The emphasis on the narrator's estrangement from the continent serves to highlight his national cultural identity as an American. More forcefully than Harris, Richburg dismisses any connection to Africa as he illustrates his emotional and cultural distance, thereby affirming "a national philosophy of individualism that ignores any cultural, social, or historical grounds for solidarity" (Levecq 82).

The journey recorded in the narrative is an accumulation of traumatic and traumatizing experiences for Richburg. Unlike Harris, Richburg does not defer his condemnation of Africa. Right from the beginning, he stresses that Africa is indeed a place of horror. Setting the tone for the whole narrative, the Prelude opens with images of death and plunges the reader straight into a scenery of unparalleled horror: It relates how Richburg stood at the Kagera River in Tanzania, watching the corpses of the victims of the Rwandan genocide float down the river. The vivid descriptions of the "bloated" and "horribly discolored" bodies (*Out of America* xix) apparently function to produce an emotional response from the reader, fueling repulsion and disgust. Conscious that this graphic depiction draws on monolithic narratives of Africa as a nightmare, the narrator writes, "It's one of those apocryphal stories you always hear coming out of Africa, meant to demonstrate the savagery of 'the natives.' […] You heard them all, but never really believed" (xix). By presenting himself as a professional reporter and claiming the privileged and authoritative position of an eyewitness, the narrator confirms the 'apocryphal stories' about Africa. He endorsed that they were indeed his reality: "it was that image, and countless more like it, that I had to live with, and go to sleep with, for three years—three long years—that I spent covering Africa as a reporter for the *Washington Post*" (xx). Significantly, *Out of America* positions Richburg as an eyewitness to legitimize his claims. The narrator asserts authoritatively, "I watched" (xix), "I've been there," and "I've seen" (xxiii), employing the travel writer's standard defense to counter potential objections from readers (Campbell 383). The emphasis on his profession as a journalist who is committed to reporting facts functions to justify Richburg's pessimistic assessment of the contemporary state of the African continent. As a journalist and an eyewitness, the narrator claims an authoritative stance that lends weight to his personal accounts of Africa and discourages the reader from questioning his judgment. Having been there and having seen it all, as

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Richburg declares, he depicts what he regards as the 'real' Africa, unembellished and undistorted by romanticized notions of the continent.[10]

The narrative adopts the strategy of direct address to the implied reader, making it an integral and influential component of the text. For example, when graphically narrating the ferocious scene at the Kagera River, Richburg comments, "I suppose you, the reader, find this image disgusting," and he asks, "Is this depressing you, all this talk of death and dead bodies?" (*Out of America* xx). On the one hand, the direct appeal to the reader signals the narrator's awareness that his pessimistic statements could likely trigger readerly protest; on the other hand, it also serves to establish an intimate connection between narrator and reader. The narrator invites, or rather urges, the reader to accompany him on his journey when he writes, "I want you to walk with me, hold my hand as we step over the rotting corpses together, stand beside me as we gaze into the eyes of a starving child. Then maybe you'll understand a little better what it is I am trying to say" (xxi). What he is trying to say, essentially, is that Africa is beyond redemption. Richburg believes that by accompanying him on his journey, the reader will arrive at the same conclusion. Furthermore, Richburg thinks that the reader will understand his contentious statement that he, a Black American and descendant of enslaved Africans, celebrates his ancestors' forced displacement from Africa—"thank God that I am an American" (xxiv). In the narrator's opinion, the slave trade saved him from being one of the "nameless, faceless, anonymous bodies" floating down the Kagera River (xxi). He thus proposes, "Let me be your guide, and try to follow along as I lay out for you here why I feel the way I do—about Africa, about America, and mainly about myself and where it is I now know I belong" (xxiii). What follows is not a personal disclosure or self-reflective exploration of his complex emotions and his ambivalent relation to the continent but rather a condemnation of Africa as a whole. Fashioning himself as the reader's guide, the narrator directs the gaze to the terror and violence he experienced, thereby preventing readers to see Africa's other sides.

10 The gruesome depictions of Africa dominate the narrative and forcefully overturn more nuanced and complex characterizations of the continent. Although Richburg writes that he has "also seen heroism, honor, and dignity in Africa, particularly in the stories of the ordinary, anonymous people" (*Out of America* xxiv), the positive descriptions of African life perish in the face of abject horror that is foregrounded in the narrative.

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The journey on which Richburg takes his readers begins with his arrival in Nairobi, Kenya. The first chapter is titled "On Native Ground," an ironic reference to the idea that Africa is the Black diaspora's native land—an idea that the narrator obviously rejects. Rather than expressing sentiments of familiarity when arriving in Africa as other Black travelers have done, he conveys his negative impressions of Nairobi and its inhabitants when he depicts a city populated with "filthy beggar children of indeterminate sex," "[s]hady-looking Indian shopkeepers," vegetable vendors selling marijuana, "hustlers and swindlers," "leggy prostitutes," and Masai warriors (*Out of America* 8). Nairobi, the alleged native ground, is instantly defamiliarized by the "rotten, fetid stench" (4) that lies in the air, unnerving the narrator. When Richburg asks his companion, *The Washington Post*'s previous bureau chief Neil Henry who introduces Richburg to Nairobi, about the odor, he is told: "Hell, that's Africa" (4). This is a hasty and unadorned introduction to the place by Henry whose story foreshadows Richburg's own. Like Richburg, Henry is described as a gifted and ambitious young Black journalist whose spirit has been broken by his time in Africa. The narrator comments, "Now he was leaving, exhausted, beaten down by Africa. That should have been a warning for me" (4). From the very beginning, Richburg approaches Africa—"the land of his roots" about which he knew and cared little prior to his professional engagement (10)—with mixed feelings. While other Black travelers anticipate the transformative experience of their journey to Africa, expecting to feel a greater degree of freedom in a place where their appearance is the norm, Richburg is worried to be "just another face in the crowd" (21). Being in Africa, he fears, might shake his stable sense of self.

Interestingly, the first chapter relates not only Richburg's arrival in Kenya, but it also briefly introduces his personal background, recounting incidents from his childhood and young adulthood in Michigan (presumably his actual 'native ground' to which the chapter title refers). About his childhood years, Richburg writes, "Mine was not what you might call a particular 'black' childhood—just a childhood, an average American childhood" (*Out of America* 10). He grew up in a neighborhood that is described as "racially mixed" (10) and seemingly free from racial tensions—something rather surprising considering the historical context. Even as a Black child in a predominantly White private school, Richburg did not encounter racism or harassment and was "never made to feel unwelcome, never subject to any hostility" (15). However, this somewhat picturesque description of his "mostly typical American boyhood" (11) is suddenly interrupted by a short passage about the Detroit Riot of

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1967 that stretches across one and a half pages and that is simply introduced with the words, "Then the riot happened" (11). The rather minor narrative incident is noteworthy because it unveils much of Richburg's ideological position and attitudes toward Africa, anticipating his later evaluations of African people (Campbell 374). While the Detroit riots emanated from a systemic crisis generated by several factors—including the deindustrialization of Detroit, a looming economic crisis, a housing shortage, and rising racial tensions caused by the discrimination in housing and police violence against African Americans—in *Out of America*, the riots are inserted in Richburg's childhood story without any sort of historical contextualization (374-75). Richburg remembers his father saying, "I want you to see what black people are doing to their own neighborhood" (*Out of America* 12), as they watched a burning building. Notably, the narrative presents the riots as mob violence, irresponsible and self-destructive. The complex circumstances that led to this event are willfully disregarded and erroneously ignored. Discarding the impact of the past on the present, the narrator does not see a connection between the problems with which Black people in the United States struggled and the history of Black exploitation, oppression, and discrimination. Instead, he frames the high levels of crime, violence, and poverty as an African American pathology. Arguments based on race or the legacies of the past, he demands, should not be used as an explanation for social realities.[11] Likewise, at a different point in the narrative, he draws links between Africans and the Black "underclass" in the United States, proclaiming that Africa thought of foreign aid "the same way many American blacks see government assistance programs as a kind of entitlement of birth. In both cases, you're left with black people wallowing in a safety net of dependency" (180).

11 It has been noted that Richburg's travel account frequently disregards the significance of the historical background of the events he witnesses and reports on. The chapter "Thy Neighbor's Killer" is a case in point: Here, the narrator returns to the opening scene of the book, the time he stood on the bridge crossing the Kagera River and watched corpses floating downriver. As a journalist, the narrator must be well aware of the historic and current events that culminated in the Rwanda crisis; however, besides a very brief account, he "is not really interested in subtleties of historical contextualization," focusing instead on "convey[ing] the raw emotional impact of a country breaking down, of a community that has lost all sense of humanity" (Levecq 86). Dismissing the complex historical background, he depicts Africans as irrational and prone to self-destruction.

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The biased relationship between Africa and the West, which Richburg discusses at length in various parts of the narrative, is also staged at the level of the character constellation: The West, specifically the United States, is represented as the reasonable entity that must provide for Africa and this image is mirrored in the relationship between Richburg and his Kenyan office assistant George, who stands metonymically for all Africans. George functions in the narrative as the embodiment of the flawed, even corrupt, African who is prone to lying and constantly asks for salary advances and pay raises. Scrutinizing his relationship with George, the narrator states that it gave him "a good idea about how Western governments must have felt after pumping money into Africa for years only to discover that it had been siphoned off and the hand was still extended" (*Out of America* 33). According to the narrator, George with his "African way of thinking" perceives his well-situated American boss as "the new *bwana*, or sir" (35), who has an obligation to help and take care of him and his family. Creating an analogy between his position and the Western aid donor countries, Richburg thinks of himself as the reasonable character, the fair employer whose "*Western way of thinking* said that [he] just wanted to pay [George] a fair wage for a fair day's work" (35; emphasis added). Like Africa pleading for foreign aid, the narrator accuses his sweet-talking assistant of playing "the guilt strings" because as a Black boss Richburg feels somewhat obligated to express sympathy and show some generosity (34). For the narrator, the differences between him and George—and by extension all African people—are proof of a "great cultural divide" (34). Seemingly unaware of the problematic assumptions inherent in such sweeping generalizations, he reproduces and perpetuates the constructed divide between the West and Africa.

From the very beginning of his book, the narrator positions himself as a cultural outsider and insists that he has no innate knowledge of African people based on a shared racial heritage. He points out, "I myself was not any more into the African mind than were my expat friends and colleagues. I, too, was living sheltered and shielded from Africa and from Africans […]. I was also afraid of them" (*Out of America* 37). This statement affirms his American cultural identity and aligns him with his predominantly White colleagues while dismissing the idea that he could have a connection to the locals based on a shared heritage. In contrast to Harris, who acknowledges a connection to the people he encounters, even if this connection remains purely symbolic and is based only on their common humanity, Richburg vehemently opposes the idea of a shared link. In this context, Levecq notes that "Richburg's refusal

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of any kind of identification with Africa might seem like a healthy, sophisticated questioning of the idea of an automatic solidarity anchored in blackness" (87). However, when inquiring into the theorizations of Blackness and post-Blackness, it becomes evident that "[t]he search for individualism and a certain independence from racial identity […] cannot take place apart from a renewed commitment to a politics of solidarity" (89).

A major focus of the narrative is on Somalia, where Richburg reported on the unfolding crisis in the early 1990s. As the narrator reveals, it functioned as a "prism" through which he viewed "the rest of Africa" (*Out of America* 53), thus turning Somalia's fate into a symbol for the future of the entire continent. His obsession with the country stemmed from his eagerness to change what he perceived as improper media coverage and the meager international attention paid to the crisis. He discloses that as a Black reporter he saw it as his duty to expose the suffering people in Somalia and was angered by the lack of interest in the struggle of Black people on the African continent. Significantly, he remarks that it may have had something to do with "racial pride," which accounted for his presence in Africa as a Black reporter (51, 52). With his dispatches on the unfolding story and the pending famine in Somalia, he sought to arouse the emotions and feelings of responsibility of the political leaders in Washington, DC. He called for a humanitarian mission that was later carried out but that ultimately intensified the crisis. Somalia also became "the metaphor for [his] own disillusionment" (53) and a "turning point" "that would forever alter [his] view of Africa and how the continent could—or could not—be saved from itself" (64). Richburg recounts how US-American officials under the flag of the United Nations landed an attack on Somali leaders in Mogadishu, causing an unjustified assassination that resulted in the killing of four journalists by Somali civilians. The death of his friends and colleagues represents the turning point for the narrator and his relationship with Africa. Condemning the United States forces' attack, the narrator exclaims, "My own moral universe had just been turned completely upside down. We were the United States of America […]. We were supposed to be the good guys" (81). The universe, or perspective, that has been turned upside down, is the belief in an unambiguous world order in which the United States adheres to laws and a code of conduct. Yet, the conclusions he draws from the occurrences are startling: The main target of his anger are the Somali people, who seem to corrupt any attempt by the well-meaning foreign aid and military missions "who flew into the *darkness* to bring a little bit of *light*" (65; emphasis added). Drawing on the discourse of Africa as the dark continent, the narra-

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tive constructs Somalia as a "moral abyss" (81) that infects and corrupts even the most benevolent and selfless savior: "We had come into the jungle (or in this case, the desert) and adopted their survival-of-the-fittest rules. We had lost our moral high ground" (81), writes Richburg. The United States, to which Richburg ascribes reason and moral superiority, temporarily loses this moral high ground because it entered a territory of chaos and violence. Therefore, he comes to the conclusion that "Africa corrupts all those it touches" and that the continent "is a moral cesspool where best intentions come to die" (Levecq 90).

The narrator articulates a sense of personal betrayal by the Somalis, whom he initially sought to support (through his journalistic work) by drawing the international community's attention to their suffering. After the death of his colleagues, however, he reached an emotional turning point: "I'm left naked, shorn of all my truths and certainties, no longer sure of what I believe. And I'm hating them, the Somalis. Hating them because they betrayed me" (*Out of America* 89). Based on this realization, the narrator concludes, "I would have to arm myself with a new set of truths if I were to survive in Africa" (89). To arm himself with a new set of truths denotes seeing Africa as a lost continent, a dangerous and violent terrain. According to Richburg, one can only survive in Africa by adopting a certain mindset that excludes trust, hope, solidarity, and empathy. It is thus unsurprising that no matter where in Africa he stays, the narrator observes self-destruction, violence, crime, and corruption. Somalia is just one example in a litany of failing states and crumbling democracies.

Drawing on Africanist discourse, the narrative depicts Rwanda as a nation in demise, spiraling down into the abyss. It is described as a country that has "reverted to prehistoric times," with people "carrying clubs and machetes and panga knives and smashing in their neighbors' skulls and chopping off their limbs" (*Out of America* 91). Richburg unceremoniously remarks that the Rwandans are not "fully evolved human beings," but "cavemen" (91). He addresses the psychological effects these experiences have on him by stating that he cannot find the words to describe the tragedies he witnesses (99, 117), a confession made all the more pertinent when considering that finding the right words is part of his profession as a writer and journalist. The neglect of history, especially with regard to the legacies of colonialism in Africa and the lack of contextualization, is evident in several of Richburg's descriptions of sites of conflict. The reduction of complexity and the presentation of oversimplified narratives underscore his position that the past plays no central role in the present moment. Importantly, there are obvious parallels between his

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rendition of the Detroit riots, where Black people senselessly destroyed their neighborhood (as Richburg's father professed), and his portrayal of the Somalis and Rwandans as irrational and violent. He also draws links between Black Americans' "backward-looking" attitude (179)—that is, their engagement with the legacies of the slave past and Jim Crow segregation—and the way Africans make Western colonization responsible for their plight. For Richburg, the past is not an integral part of the present, neither in the United States nor in Africa. This lack of critical inquiry into the past highlights the narrator's ideological position, which is rooted in "neoconservative beliefs about individual responsibility but also in deeply engrained American beliefs about freedom and the human capacity for reinvention" (Campbell 391).

Given Richburg's experiences at sites of war and conflict and his grim account of them, it comes as no surprise, then, that he feels no emotional attachment when visiting Gorée Island. His reaction is similar to Harris's in that he renders his visit in a detached fashion in the chapter that bears the ironic title "Homecoming." Certainly, Richburg's visit is not in the least framed by notions of diasporic homecoming and return or by any sort of personal or spiritual connection. Instead, his overall feelings are characterized by disturbance. Having witnessed the atrocities in Somalia and Rwanda, he condemns the idea of a maternal homeland and underscores his disconnection from Africa. He writes, "it was too late now. I had come to Goree from the East, from the darkness, and I had already seen way too much of Mother Africa, and what I had seen had already made me sick" (*Out of America* 162). In essence, for the narrator, the romance of diaspora is an illusion sustained by African Americans' ignorance of contemporary African realities and a superficial engagement with the continent.

At the end of Richburg's stay in Africa, his experiences leave him bitter and devoid of hope and compassion (*Out of America* 227). Appropriately enough, the last chapter of the travel narrative is titled "Retreat." Employing the language of warfare, Richburg describes his African journey as a battle fought and lost. He declares his 'defeat' and subsequent 'retreat' from the continent when he states, "I'm beaten down" (225). The last chapter, therefore, is a grim conclusion of his time in Africa. The narrator muses, "Africa. Birthplace of civilization. My ancestral homeland. I came here thinking 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 nightmares" (225). Forcefully disputing visions of Africa as the Black diaspora's home, the narrator projects his fears, anxiety, disap-

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pointment, and anger onto it. Africa is personified and portrayed as a violent perpetrator and senseless killer against whom he tries to guard himself. The fences around his property in Nairobi, the alarm system, the metal door on his house, the watchdogs, and the security guard he employs all serve "to prevent Africa from sneaking across my front yard and bashing in [his] brains with a panga knife for the two hundred dollars and change [he] keep[s] in [the] top desk drawer" (226). These precautionary measures symbolize the emotional shields set up to guard himself; and these shields do not allow that a different version of Africa enters his mind or heart. As a result, he stresses his disconnection from Africa and rejects the label *African* American: "I am an American, a black American, and I feel no connection to this strange and violent place. […] I couldn't even bring myself to write 'African American'" (227). His statement functions to divorce the narrator from anything remotely African. Clearly, his text argues for an unbridgeable divide between him and the people he encounters and a cultural, emotional, and psychological disconnection from Africa that stresses his Americanness. Moreover, being away strengthens Richburg's connection to America and affirms his American identity. Having come to the conclusion that Africa is indeed a lost and hopeless continent, the narrator turns his attention to the United States. As Campbell points out, some African American travelers "have denied any connection to the continent, the better to advance their claim to full citizenship in the United States" (xxiii-xxiv). As Richburg's travelogue illustrates, Africa is the terrain upon which this validation of the self occurs. In this sense, his travelogue employs "Africa as a symbolic battleground to work out fundamentally American issues" (Levecq 82).

Having dismissed Africa as irredeemably lost, the narrative turns to the United States, conjuring a vision of a country that is on its way into a better future. Richburg's own story functions as an example of the country's continuous progress. To underscore his argument that Black Americans in the United States have every imaginable opportunity he presents the narrative of his life as proof and depicts his mostly idyllic childhood, his education at a prestigious university, and his professional career as a journalist of one of the nation's leading newspapers as anything but exceptional or privileged. Issues such as systemic racism and racial discrimination are touched upon only very briefly: The narrator admits "that being black means being different, alien, never quite belonging" (*Out of America* 231) and recognizes that he too experiences various forms of racism and microaggression in America. For example, he notes how he is eyed suspiciously in stores when he is not dressed

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in a suit and tie, addresses the difficulties he sometimes has when hailing a taxi in New York or Washington, and explains that he is careful to take off his sunglasses when stopped by the police while driving (228-29). However, when he looks at the United States from a distance, he endorses "that nothing makes you appreciate your own country like traveling away from it […]. I see the flaws, I curse the intolerance, I recoil from the racial and ethnic tensions. […] But even with all that […] I recognize that it's the only place I truly belong" (235). Although the forms of racism that Richburg briefly addresses point to the pervasive problems in American society and culture as well as to the enduring legacies of slavery and segregation, they are made to appear as mere inconveniences in comparison to the abject conditions with which the narrator sees himself confronted in Africa. Based on these contestations, he summons Black Americans, the "sons and daughters of America's soil," to abandon the search for alternative homelands and roots in Africa and instead focus their attention on the United States: "Far better that we all put our energies into making America work better, into realizing the dream of a multiracial society, than clinging to the myth that we belong anyplace else" (237). The fact that Denver, a majority White city, elected a Black mayor while Africa continues to struggle with the corrosive influence of tribalism, is proof for Richburg that "there's a chance that the old dream of a multiracial, colorblind society is slowly being realized. It had better be, because I've been there and seen the alternative" (242). The fact that African Americans are no longer barred from positions of political power is used as indisputable evidence for how much the country has progressed. Therefore, *Out of America* reveals Richburg's belief in a narrative of historical progress and discards the idea that the present is influenced by the past—a viewpoint heavily disputed by Black studies scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (see ch. IV, sec. 4.2).

In this regard, the foreword to the 2009 edition of his travel narrative is a timely addition to the original text and serves to underscore Richburg's earlier conviction. In the original text, written twelve years earlier, he already anticipated social and political progress and predicted a promising future for Black people in the United States. The election of President Obama confirmed his assumption. When *Out of America* was republished in the first year of the Obama presidency, Richburg uses the elation surrounding the election of the first Black president as an argument that further supports his assessment of the United States as a nation full of possibilities for people of color. The election of Obama underlined Richburg's faith in a nation "where even for a black man, a descendant of slaves, anything and everything was possible"

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(xiv). For him a Black president is proof that "the faith [he] put in this country has been more than vindicated" (xviii). In a similar vein, he also supports his earlier assessment of Africa by enclosing a summary of current developments on the continent that functions as evidence of the persistent problems, thus lending weight to his previous observations.

The end of the narrative mirrors its beginning: As Richburg prepares for his departure, he passes his job on to a successor who, like Richburg when he first set foot in Kenya, is depicted as a young Black reporter from New York beaming with energy and anticipation. By mirroring Richburg's arrival in Kenya, the scene supports the assumption that the young reporter will follow a similar fate as the narrator and his predecessor. Tellingly, Richburg does not end his story on African ground but with him leaving the place he has come to despise. The closing scene shows the narrator on a plane taking off from Nairobi, eager to leave everything behind, and heading back to the United States—"out of Africa, home" (*Out of America* 246). Aboard the plane, looking out the window, the narrator observes how "Africa recedes further and further away into the distance, further into [his] mind" until it is merely a "dark spot on the globe" (247). The increasing physical distance between the narrator and Africa symbolizes his growing emotional detachment and indifference, which is underscored by declarations such as "I don't care anymore," "none of it affects me," "I feel no attachment to the place or the people" (247). Announcing that he feels no sympathy for the people and that he no longer cares about Africa's fate, Richburg turns his back on Africa. He reflects the same ignorance and indifference of which he had accused the West and the international media when the crisis in Somalia began to unfold. Proclaiming to feel no attachment or responsibility anymore, one is left to wonder, however, whether this may be a strategic move to incite readerly objection and urge readers to care.

While Africa dwindles into a dark spot, Richburg further demonstrates his indifference to the continent by switching the channel on the television screen to the music station when a BBC news report about Rwanda comes on. Turning one last time directly to the reader, the narrator ends his account with the following words:

> So am I a coldhearted cynic? An Africa hater? A racist, maybe, or perhaps a lost and lonely self-hating black man who has forgotten his African roots? Maybe I am, all that and more. But by an accident of my birth, I am a black man born in America, and everything I am today—my culture and attitudes,

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> my sensibilities, loves, and desires—derives from that one simple and irrefutable truth. (*Out of America* 248)

The last sentence functions to affirm once more the narrator's US-American identity and to claim his place in a society that marginalizes and excludes Black Americans. Returning to the title of the travelogue, *Out of America* can therefore also be read as Richburg's endorsement that he is essentially out of—meaning 'from'—America. Richburg disputes the idea of an African heritage that informs his sense of self. Instead, like Harris, Richburg employs the African continent as a terrain upon which he strengthens his selfhood as a Black American as he decenters the pertinence of Africa and counters claims of race-based affiliations between Black people in the United States and Africa. However, whereas Harris retains a notion of international political solidarity and empathy when he departs from Africa, Richburg's experiences cause him to completely reject any kind of further engagement with Africa.

Scrutinizing narratives of travel to Africa by Black American authors, Youngs identifies a tendency of traveler-writers "to examine their own identity in relationship to either side of the Atlantic. Such trips tend either to ease a sense of fracture or to affirm a feeling of estrangement. The latter often results in an uncomfortable recognition that their authors' home really is in the United States" ("African American Travel" 119). Clearly, the above-discussed travelogues show how the writers use their texts to stress their distance from Africa and endorse the centrality of the United States for their conception of self. *Native Stranger* and *Out of America* differ greatly in style and content; one chronicling the leisurely, self-determined journey across Africa by a professional writer, the other a journalistic account of events and personal experiences rendered in a straight-forward, unpoetic manner. However, despite their differences, the texts share key concerns: Both travel narratives demystify Africa and disenchant the idea of diasporic return and the notion of Africa as a homeland. In the end, both narrators leave Africa disappointed and disillusioned. Richburg explains, "I've been here too long" (*Out of America* 242) and "I had seen too much" (221), suggesting that if one stays in Africa for a longer period of time, one inevitably sees nothing but despair. His assertion that one must discard feelings of attachment if one takes a closer look at Africa is in line with Harris's finding that if one comes too close to Africa, it loses its magic (*Native Stranger* 266). Harris argues that when relinquishing the distance and seeing Africa up close, the unfolding contradictions are

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too numerous and the differences too large to be overcome. As a result, he concludes that Africa can only be embraced from a distance. Both narrators also remark that Africa imprints nightmarish images into their consciousness that haunt them in their dreams—as Harris emphasizes, the experiences leave "scars that will mark my soul and my memory for as long as memory lasts" (285). Importantly, for Harris and Richburg, Africa serves as a contrastive foil. Emphatically, they reaffirm their Americanness and deemphasize the role of Africa as a reference point for Black American subjectivity.

I want to conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of another journalistic account of Africa that can be read as a response to both *Native Stranger* and *Out of America*. This response comes from African American journalist Lynne Duke who, like Richburg, worked as a foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*. She was stationed in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 1994 to 1999. Duke's *Mandela, Mobutu, and Me: A Newswoman's African Journey* (2003) is the record of her experiences in Africa. The fall of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the advent of Nelson Mandela's presidency, and Mobutu Sese Seko's reign in Zaire are among the major foci of her book. Although Duke's journey can likewise be described as one of disillusionment that challenges idealized visions of return trips to the ancestral homeland, it nevertheless articulates a perception of Africa that is quite different from those of Harris and Richburg. While she shares many of the experiences of her predecessors, she arrives at different conclusions concerning the significance of the continent for her life. Importantly, her recognition that "Africa at times could be profoundly brutal and maddeningly dysfunctional" (*Mandela* 11) and the fact that the suffering she witnesses brings her to the edge of what she can bear, does not result in her condemnation or wholesale rejection of the continent and its people. Duke emphasizes her American sense of self while simultaneously affirming a cultural connection to Africa. In contrast to the unmistakably bleak conceptions and clichéd images of Africa employed in the travel narratives by Harris and Richburg, Duke's narrative takes into account the rich variety of contemporary African cultures, thus presenting an antipode to the reductionist depictions of the continent that were proliferating in the media at the time of her writing.

Duke's narrative demonstrates that she is acutely aware of her role as a journalist and her work's impact in shaping Western images of Africa. Struggling with the question of what stories should be told—those of the wars and crises she witnessed, which would perpetuate the image of the 'dark continent,' or stories of prosperity and beauty, which would bear the risk of ro-

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manticizing Africa and ignoring its contemporary challenges—she opts for an approach that neither simply reiterates narratives of suffering nor glosses them over. Defying easy generalizations and undermining pessimistic and monolithic narratives of Africa, her narrative aims to present a nuanced depiction of the contemporary political and social conditions and developments of different African nations. This goal is reflected in the way Duke criticizes and counters the simplistic media characterizations of Mandela, "the messiah of the liberation movement" (*Mandela* 16), and Mobutu Sese Seko, "the venal dictator" (9). As a result, her characterizations and description are complex and multifaceted, as is her own relationship with Africa. In contrast to Harris's failed attempt to approach Africa free from preconceived images and Richburg's unwillingness to critically scrutinize his own underlying ideologies, attitudes, and assumptions, in *Mandela, Mobutu, and Me*, Duke self-reflexively examines her subject position as a Black woman and privileged Western traveler and considers the impact of her writing about African on mainstream American opinion (173).[12]

Duke seeks out stories that represent "Africa's normality and humanity," which she discovers in a small village in Namibia where she listens to the people's stories, encountering "the poetry of ordinary Africa" (*Mandela* 176). Without falling into the trap of romanticizing Africa, the narrative documents the multifarious stories of ordinary people whose voices have been silenced. The narrative thus opposes the bleak stories of Africa, while not denying the existence of suffering and pain. Duke's appreciation of ordinary African life and her acceptance of its contradictions allow her to claim her very own, personal connection to the continent. In a chapter tellingly titled "An African American Woman," the narrator asserts her connection to Africa as "a genealogic fact" that compels her to embrace the continent: "In all its splendor, its struggle, its

12 For example, Duke's self-awareness is reflected in the way she approaches the problem of corruption, a topic also discussed by Richburg. While Richburg suggests that this is a cultural problem when he wonders if "there is something in the nature of Africans that makes them more prone to corruption" (*Out of America* 175), Duke scrutinizes her own complicity in the cultural dynamics at work: After bribing a health examiner to give her a stamped and signed health certificate, she feels remorseful and admits, "I felt guilty. In the blink of an eye, I'd become complicit in a practice that was eating away at African society. Sure, it's not a purely African phenomenon" (*Mandela* 56). Her comments illustrate that she aligns herself with the common people who are caught in the mechanisms of corruption, unable to escape. Instead of only judging people, she holds herself responsible for participating in the system.

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horror, Africa is in me. […] I could say that the ties that once bound black people in Africa and the Americans have been severed by time and mean nothing now. Others have made that case. That is not where I stand" (245-46). In contrast to Richburg who cannot bring himself to write "African American" (227), Duke confirms her heritage and genealogical connection to Africa by calling herself an African American.

Mandela, Mobutu, and Me can be read as a counter-narrative to the accounts by Harris and Richburg. In a passage toward the end of her narrative, Duke directly refers to other Black American travelers whose experiences in Africa have caused them to reject the continent and with it their 'Africanness' altogether:

> Others, who perhaps know more of Africa, have been so repulsed by Africa's starving children, its murderous mobs, and its thieving dictators that they have decided they simply cannot claim the African part of their identity. Whole books have been written on the subject, mostly built on the false notion that Americanness and Africanness are somehow mutually exclusive, as if we have a choice. For me, it is not that complicated. My people became American because of what was done to Africa. The histories of both lands inhabit my consciousness and course through my veins. (*Mandela* 246)

Forcefully criticizing literary works about Africa such as those of her male contemporaries, who employ their travelogues and depictions of Africa to endorse their disconnection from the continent, Duke acknowledges the significance of Africa in all its different facets for her diasporic subjectivity. Her travelogue counters the predominantly negative depictions of Africa that are produced in Western media and cultural and literary productions that foreground political conflicts, ethnic wars, and corrupt governance structures. She does so, however, without evoking a mythical homeland or depicting romanticized images of Africa. Claiming Africa as part of her identity is also a political act for Duke and a way to express solidarity with Black people's struggle against racism and oppression in Africa. For this reason, she can accept a "composite identity" stemming from the "inheritance of the Middle Passage" (257). Contrary to the accounts by Harris and Richburg, Duke does not allow the disheartening stories of violence and despair to overwrite her positive and encouraging experiences, the stories full of hope, humanity, and empathy. As a result, her travel narrative represents Africa and her relationship with it in a more nuanced fashion that leaves room for envisioning a future of diasporic solidarity.

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