Lies of the Land

Allan deSouza

I.

He wears the long white gown and kofi of the coastal people. Over one shoulder is slung a musket, over the other is a strap from which hangs a sword. His arms are stiff, one hand grasping the musket handle, the other within close reach of the sword. A wide belt pulled tight into his waist makes his chest appear thrust out like a soldier at attention. His face is turned to one side, away from the camera, with his eyes seemingly focused at a point out of the camera's frame. Closer inspection reveals his eyes to be angled back; not looking at, but watching the camera as if from behind the shelter of gauze. It's an apprehensive gaze, knowing he is being recorded; turning his face away to avoid the camera's scrutiny, but glancing back just to keep an eye on the watcher.

Born near the shores of Lake Nyasa, he was kidnapped as a child and transported to Zanzibar, where he was sold to an Arab merchant and taken to India. Freed at his master's death, his name being unknown—or at least untranslatable—he was renamed after the city where his master had lived. With his new moniker, Bombay, he returned to the continent of his original naming. And there, already reinvented, he might have been lost had he not also been rediscovered.

In 1856, two British Army officers, Richard Burton and John Speke, met in Bombay (the city) to plan an African expedition. Sailing from Bombay (the city) to Africa, they recruited a Swahili guide and his slave, four more African slaves, four Baluchi soldiers, an Arab and last, a Yau from Nyasa: Bombay (the man).

Knowing a little Hindustani from his days in Bombay (the city), Bombay (the man) was able to speak with Speke who spoke no other language to converse with the natives. An Englishman and an African in East Africa who communicated only through Hindustani. A previously unimagined communing.

According to Richard Burton, Bombay had "A high narrow cranium, denoting by arched and rounded crown, fuyant brow and broad base with full development of the moral region, deficiency of the reflectives, fine perceptives, and abundant animality."

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II.

According to David Livingstone's diaries, Bombay had "lifted Speke out of the disagreeable position of being a silent onlooker […] Before getting him, Speke sat on his bottom only." Not only did Speke become translatable, but he was given—by this renamed man—the ability his name suggested: the power of his own voice.

The expedition went south and west and north and round and north again. But none of that matters since these paths were already well traversed by Africans. What does it matter—more pertinently, to whom does it matter?—whose pale feet stepped there first? Clearly it mattered to the owners of the pale feet. Not satisfied with having reached his goal—the source of the Nile—Speke returned for another long trudge, up, down, etc., this time with an old friend from his hunting days in India, Captain James Grant, whose skills included a "conciliatory manner with coloured men."

Speke and Grant employed Bombay to organize and lead the caravan of porters, and to barter at villages. A lively trudge apparently, Grant remarking that, "Nothing can exceed the noise and jollity of an African camp at night. We, the masters, were often unable to hear ourselves talk for the merry song and laughter, the rattle of drums, jingling of bells, beating of old iron, and discordant talk going on round our tents."

Speke, not the first nor the last to correlate Africans and rhythm, added, "song they have none, being mentally incapacitated for musical composition, though as timists they are not to be surpassed," while also noting the hopelessness of the Indians at such entertainment.

In 1866, David Livingstone arrived in Bombay (the city), at a mission school to recruit whitened Africans for expeditions back in blackest Africa. Off they jolly well went, weighted down with weapons, camping equipment, scientific instruments, barter goods and gifts for local rulers, including merikani—cotton sheeting from America—and kaniki—indigo cloth from India. A portentous meld of America, India, Britain and Africa. A previously unimagined community.

III.

In 1871, as every tinted urchin from the pink zone knows, Henry Stanley entered history, presumptuously. Born in Wales as John Rowlands, he was orphaned and worked his ship's passage to America as a cabin boy. There, he was adopted by a New Orleans cotton broker, whose name he took. In other words, Stanley—like Bombay—was a renamed, self-made, made-up man.

Henry Stanley—as a journalist for the *New York Herald* and fresh from a story in Wyoming about the other kind of Indians—stepped off the boat at Zanzibar to look for Livingstone. It was an expedition, it could be said, by one white man to discover another white man, an Americanized Welshman in search of an anglicized Scotsman in darkest Africa. To lead the way, Stanley enlisted Bombay (the man).

Of the eighteen men recruited as guards by Bombay, Stanley noted that "They were an exceedingly fine looking body of men, far more intelligent of appearance than I could ever have believed African barbarians could be." In defense of his expectations towards Africans, Stanley offered his own version of the some-of-my-best-friends-are … maxim: "I had met in the United States black men, whom I was proud to call friends."

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To Henry Stanley, Bombay was "a short slender man of 50 or thereabouts, with a grizzled head, an uncommonly high, narrow forehead, with a very large mouth, showing teeth very irregular, and wide apart […] at his first appearance I was favorably impressed with Bombay."

When Livingstone was duly discovered (another meld of Africa, Britain, America, and India—or at least Bombay), he noted the historic meeting with a sketch of Bombay (the man), with the added, less historic description: "Square head of Bombay top depressed in centre."

IV.

In the 1939 film, *Stanley and Livingstone*, (shot at a Hollywood studio, with added stock footage of African animals) Stanley is thrown a red herring: led to a white man, he finds an albino. His (mis)guide asks, "You mean he's a black white man?" and is answered with, "No, he's a white black man."

Stanley was "given" a seven-year-old slave. From Ndugu M'hali, My Brother's Wealth, he was renamed Kalulu, Young Antelope (no record exists of the boy's views on his demotion from family treasure to tourist pet). Stanley later took Kalulu—dressed in liveried splendor—to Europe, where he made a deep impression with his "excellent manners." In London, Kalulu modeled for Madame Tussauds' wax version of Stanley and Livingstone's legendary meeting. In America, Kalulu appeared at Stanley's public lectures, entertaining audiences with Swahili songs. Two mementos remain: one, Stanley named his novel, a romantic evocation of Africa, *My Kalulu*; two, in 1877, Kalulu fell and drowned at a place Stanley subsequently named Kalulu Falls.

In 1875, Bombay (the man), who—if not fame, had by now gained a certain, perhaps literal track record—was employed on another expedition, with Verney Cameron. Crossing Africa from Zanzibar to the west coast, Cameron was not quite as smitten, describing Bombay as having, "lost much of the energy he displayed in his journeys with our predecessors in African travel, and was much inclined to trade upon his previous reputation," adding that he was "neither the 'Angel' of Colonel Grant nor the 'Devil' of Mr. Stanley."

Africa's greatest uncredited traveler, Bombay saw Africa's surrounding waters, the Atlantic, the Indian, the Mediterranean and the Cape of Good Hope. Desiring another journey, he wrote to Grant: "Bana Grant, I, Bombay, send for my old master plenty salaam. I have been many years with white men, Cameron, Speke, Stanley &c, but have not yet seen England their home, and as I am getting old, I should like to see the land of my old master before I die." His wish, to follow his masters to their homeland, was not to be realized. Fittingly, he died in Zanzibar, an island one step off the mainland, floating out towards Bombay (the city).

V.

In 1948, my father left Bombay (the city) and arrived in Nairobi, where he met my mother and where I was later born. An Indian in Africa, I was named after a popular American actor whose Anglo name my parents believed would also grant me some ease

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of access within the then British colony: another potent meld—at least to me—of India, Africa, Britain and America.

In 1965 we left an independent Kenya for England, the land of the former masters. In 1980, I traveled to Bombay (the city). Standing at India Gate, I looked west towards my birthplace across the ocean. I imagined my father years before, standing in the same place, looking away from his birthplace.

Clad in a beige linen suit specially made for his journey, or perhaps bedecked in khaki and accessorized topi, my father steps off Indian ground. He grabs a railing and pulls himself up the steep gangplank as though the land refuses to let go. He totters for a moment, looking down to the water, unsure which direction to go—up onto the ship, or back down to the solid familiarity of land.

Does he remain on deck as the ship pulls away, until he can no longer see the features in the rows of faces, until the faces themselves become a smear? Does he watch until the activity of the Bombay docks disappears, until the only building he can see is the gigantic arch of India Gate bidding him farewell as once it had welcomed English monarchy? Does he look until all he can see is water, all he can hear are the crash of waves against the ship and the wailing of seagulls?

None before him have returned; he has no intention of being the first. Though many families have lost their sons to Overseas, they bear the loss proudly, with visible material compensations. With the money sent back, these families rebuild their houses in anticipation of their sons' triumphant returns. As the years pass with no sign of the prodigals, blue airmail envelopes with colorful stamps are instead ceremonially withdrawn from glass cabinets and passed around as proof of distant loyalty.

VI.

All I have are fantasies and inventions of the passage from India to Africa. They fabricate a genealogy; not a family tree, but a root of familiarity. I swaddle myself within this security blanket of imagined history. A re-collection of possibilities, of memory-threads cast to the winds, drawn back and re-cast in different directions.

Would my father always be caught between east and west, south and north, between inside and outside; neither house nor field? Never knowing which way to turn, which way to pursue his dreams, to the rising or the setting sun?

I used to say I was Kenyan, but people would just look at me expectantly. Relenting, I would mumble something about my grandparents being from India. An occasional colonial relic might jabber at me in Swahili or Hindi, and when I couldn't reply in kind I would look like a perfect idiot or simply like a liar.

I'm not a proper Indian, from India; nor a proper African, though I'm from there. And what kind of name is mine, especially when attached to a face dark as mine? What does it mean for me to not know my "own" tongue, and to be able to slip into the Jamaicanized cockney of an East London barrow boy? Or the jive of a Bronx B-boy? Should I be what you want? Why not be whatever I want?

Where am I on the slippery road between one place and another? Am I fully here or is part of me always elsewhere? Am I this? Am I that? I rarely ask such questions, though I face them on a daily basis. I shape-shift partly in response to and partly in revolt against what's expected of me. One day I'm Brazilian, another, Tahitian, or Maori,

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Hawaiian. I even try Tasmanian. It's a game to ward off stupid questions—do-you-a-speak-a-Eng-lish?—and a way of refusing to be known.

VII.

I had a story with no beginning and no end. No past, no future, only the possibility of coming into being. A story, not so much recitation, but re-siting. Having changed places, stopped and restarted, this story is of the becoming, not just of the places—the changed from and the changed to—but of the changing; not just of the leaving and arriving, but of the passage itself.

In the beginning was before the word. How then to tell the story of this beforeness? Of my story before it is spoken, before it descends from the convolutions of the mind to the slippery slope of the tongue? Of the history that names me? And what of the history that misnames me?

How do I tell the story of what I believe to be my self—the differences and indifferences that I can't translate, so that whenever I open my mouth to speak it's always already of a middle with a missing beginning? All I can do is keep returning in hindsight, to middles, to beginnings, to what comes before:

Vibrations tingle my body; soothing then forceful. They gribble up my chest, up to my face and for a brief, ghastly moment my eyeballs bounce in their sockets. I'm pushed back against the seat but manage to turn my face towards the window and see the ground racing past. Abruptly, the vibrations stop, my eyes stilled. We're up. Off the ground. The world inside tips backwards the land outside falls away.

I push forward, face against the window. Roads tentacle in every direction, a maze of secrets. From up here, individuals are lost, each life a fleck of dust. Higher, trees and cars are bleached of color; higher, buildings become an indistinct fuzz of grays and browns. Higher, the main Nairobi-Mombasa road unravels like discarded string; higher, rivers and lakes glint silver, all other features little more than tonal disruptions against an overall haze. Higher still, all details disappear in washes of murky hues.

VIII.

I'm looking out at the ground below, 30,000 feet below says a crackling voice from an intercom or from inside my head; cruising at 500 mph it says, air temperature is -20. The meaningless numbers bear no relation to what my eyes tell me. I see fissures, crannies, gouges, lumps as far as where the world curves away. It could be a landscape: mountains and valleys, forests and plains. Or I could be a baby lying on my mother's breast, her body the extent of my world, laid out below me with its enigmatic geography: valleys and mountains, plains and forests.

I don't know how many hours later it is, but we've reached the coast. The Mediterranean, the voice says, surf frilling the strike of water and land with a ruffle collar. The plane slows to an immobile hover. I bathe my eyes in the turquoise sea beneath, then close them, floating in an orange afterimage. It feels like we've left the world.

The planet continues its lumbering revolutions; people are laughing, crying, wars are fought, babies born.

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I wake with a start. The sound of the engines has changed, becoming more urgent. Seatbelts, the voice says. The plane tilts forward—Ladies and gentlemen, we shall be arriving at Heathrow Airport, London.

My stomach lurches with excitement. As if in response, the plane dips suddenly, plunging into clouds that could be the same as the ones over Nairobi. If I hadn't been told by the voice I would have thought that we had just gone in a circle, or the earth might have turned one way and we'd gone the opposite way so that we hadn't moved our position at all.

Clouds part in revelation: England, a patchwork of fields, each square hemmed neatly by hedges. A quilt of fables rushes up to greet me, of a land of glory and hope, of order and decency, of red letterboxes, of a white woman with a golden crown, of friendly blue bobbies.

As they say … the lie of the land.

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