The Source of Self-Regard

Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations

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camera. I must be steady and I must be clear, knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become.

And I have nothing to give either—except this gesture, this thread thrown between your humanity and mine: *I want to hold you in my arms* and as your soul got shot of its box of flesh to understand, as you have done, the wit of eternity: its gift of unhinged release tearing through the darkness of its knell.

May 27, 2002

The Foreigner's Home

EXCLUDING THE HEIGHT of the slave trade in the nineteenth century, the mass movement of peoples in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is greater now than it has ever been. It is a movement of workers, intellectuals, refugees, armies crossing oceans, continents, immigrants through custom offices and hidden routes, speaking multiple languages of trade, of political intervention, of persecution, exile, violence, and poverty. There is little doubt that the redistribution (voluntary or involuntary) of people all over the globe tops the agenda of the state, the boardrooms, the neighborhoods, the street. Political maneuvers to control this movement are not limited to monitoring the dispossessed. While much of this exodus can be described as the journey of the colonized to the seat of the colonizers (slaves, as it were, abandoning the plantation for the planters' home), and while more of it is the flight of war refugees, the relocation and transplantation of the management and diplomatic class to globalization's outposts, as well as the deployment of fresh military units and bases, feature prominently in legislative attempts to control the constant flow of people.

The spectacle of mass movement draws attention inevitably to the borders, the porous places, the vulnerable points where one's concept of home is seen as being menaced by foreigners. Much of the alarm hovering at the borders, the gates, is stoked, it seems to me, by (1) both the threat and the promise of globalism and (2) an uneasy relation-

ship with our own foreignness, our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging.

Let me begin with globalization. In our current understanding, globalization is not a version of the nineteenth-century "Britannia rules" format—although postcolonial upheavals reflect and are reminiscent of the domination one nation had over most others. The term does not have the "workers of the world unite" agenda of the old internationalism, although that was the very word—"internationalism"—that the president of the AFL-CIO used at the executive council of union presidents. Nor is the globalism the postwar appetite for "one world," the rhetoric that stirred and bedeviled the fifties and launched the United Nations. Nor is it the "universalism" of the sixties and seventies—either as a plea for world peace or an insistence on cultural hegemony. "Empire," "internationalism," "one world," "universal"—all seem less like categories of historical trends than yearnings. Yearnings to corral the earth into some semblance of unity and some measure of control, to conceive of the planet's human destiny as flowing from one constellation of nations' ideology. Globalism has the same desires and yearnings as its predecessors. It too understands itself as historically progressive, enhancing, destined, unifying, utopian. Narrowly defined, it is meant to mean instant movement of capital and the rapid distribution of data and products operating within a politically neutral environment shaped by multinational corporate demands. Its larger connotations, however, are less innocent, encompassing as they do not only the demonization of embargoed states or the trivialization cum negotiation with warlords, but also the collapse of nation-states under the weight of transnational economies, capital, and labor; the preeminence of Western culture and economy; the Americanization of the developed and developing world through the penetration of U.S. culture into others as well as the marketing of third-world cultures to the West as fashion, film settings, and cuisine.

Globalization, hailed with the same vigor as was manifest destiny, internationalism, etc., has reached a level of majesty in our imagination. For all its claims of fostering freedom, globalism's dispensations are royal, for it can bestow much. In matters of reach (across frontiers); in terms of mass (of populations affected and engaged); and in terms of riches (limitless fields to mine for resources and services to offer). Yet as much as globalism is adored as near messianic, it is also reviled as an evil courting a dangerous dystopia. Its disregard of borders, national infrastructures, local bureaucracies, internet censors, tariffs, laws, and languages; its disregard of margins and the marginal people who live there; its formidable, engulfing properties accelerating erasure, a flattening out of difference, of specificity for marketing purposes. An abhorrence of diversity. We imagine indistinguishability, the elimination of minority languages, minority cultures in its wake. We speculate with horror on what could be the irrevocable, enfeebling alteration of major languages, major cultures in its sweep. Even if those dreaded consequences are not made completely manifest, they nevertheless cancel out globalism's assurances of better life by issuing dire warnings of premature cultural death.

Other dangers globalism poses are the distortion of the public and the destruction of the private. We glean what is public primarily, but not exclusively, from media. We are asked to abandon much of what was once private to the data-collecting requirements of governmental, political, market, and now security needs. Part of the anxiety about the porous divide between public and private domains certainly stems from reckless applications of the terms. There is the privatization of prisons, which is the private corporate control of a public facility. There is the privatization of public schools. There is also private life—claims to which can be given up freely on talk shows, or negotiated in the courts by celebrities, "public" figures, and privacy rights cases. There is private space (atriums, gardens, etc.) open to the public. And public space (parks, playgrounds, and beaches in certain neighborhoods) limited to private use. There is the looking-glass phenomenon of the "play" of the public in our private, interior lives. Interiors of our houses look like store displays (along with shelf after shelf of "collections") and store displays are arranged as house interiors; young people's behavior is said to be an echo of what the screen offers; the screen is said to echo, represent, youthful interests and behavior—not create them. Since the space in which both civic and

private life is lived has become so indistinguishable from inner and outer, from inside/outside, these two realms have been compressed into a ubiquitous blur, a rattling of our concept of home.

It is this rattling I believe that affects the second point: our uneasiness with our own feelings of foreignness, our own rapidly fraying sense of belonging. To what do we pay greatest allegiance? Family, language group, culture, country, gender? Religion, race? And if none of these matter, are we urbane, cosmopolitan, or simply lonely? In other words, how do we decide where we belong? What convinces us that we do? Or put another way, what is the matter with foreignness?

I have chosen to comment on a novel written in the fifties by a Ghanaian author as a means of addressing this dilemma—the inside/outside blur that can enshrine frontiers, and borders real, metaphorical, and psychological, as we wrestle with definitions of nationalism, citizenship, race, ideology, and the so-called clash of cultures in our search to belong.

African and African American writers are not alone in coming to terms with these problems, but they do have a long and singular history of confronting them. Of not being at home in one's homeland; of being exiled in the place one belongs.

Before I discuss this novel, I want to describe what preceded my reading of African literature and compelled my excursion into what troubles contemporary definitions of the foreign.

Velvet-lined offering plates were passed down the pews on Sunday. The last one was the smallest and the one most likely to be empty. Its position and size signaled the dutiful but limited expectations that characterized most everything in the thirties. The coins, never bills, sprinkled there were mostly from children encouraged to give up their pennies and nickels for the charitable work so necessary for the redemption of Africa. Although the sound of the name, "Africa," was beautiful it was riven by the complicated emotions with which it was associated. Unlike starving China, Africa was both ours and theirs; intimately connected to us and profoundly foreign. A huge needy homeland to which we were said to belong but that none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive, traumatized otherness cultivated by textbooks, film, cartoons, and the hostile name-calling children learn to love.

Later, when I began to read fiction set in Africa, I found that, with no exceptions that I knew of, each narrative elaborated on and enhanced the very mythology that accompanied those velvet plates floating between the pews. For Joyce Cary, Elspeth Huxley, H. Rider Haggard, Africa was precisely what the missionary collection implied: a dark continent in desperate need of light. The light of Christianity, of civilization, of development. The light of charity switched on by simple goodheartedness. It was an idea of Africa fraught with the assumptions of a complex intimacy coupled with an acknowledgment of unmediated estrangement. This conundrum of foreign ownership alienating the local population, of the dispossession of native speakers from their home, the exile of indigenous peoples within their home contributed a surreal glow to these narratives, enticing the writers to project a metaphysically void Africa ripe for invention. With one or two exceptions, literary Africa was an inexhaustible playground for tourists and foreigners. In the work of Joseph Conrad, Isak Dinesen, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, whether imbued with or struggling against conventional Western views of benighted Africa, their protagonists found the continent to be as empty as that collection plate—a vessel waiting for whatever copper and silver imagination was pleased to place there. As grist for Western mills, accommodatingly mute, conveniently blank, Africa could be made to support a wide variety of literary and/or ideological requirements. It could stand back as scenery for any exploit or leap forward and obsess itself with the woes of any foreigner; it could contort itself into frightening malignant shapes upon which Westerners could contemplate evil; or it could kneel and accept elementary lessons from its betters. For those who made that literal or imaginative voyage, contact with Africa offered thrilling opportunities to experience life in its primitive, formative, inchoate state, the consequence of which experience was self-enlightenment—a wisdom that confirmed the benefits of European proprietorship free

of the responsibility of gathering overly much actual intelligence about the African culture that stimulated the enlightenment. So big-hearted was this literary Africa, only a little geography, lots of climate, a few customs and anecdotes sufficed as the canvas upon which a portrait of a wiser or sadder or fully reconciled self could be painted. In Western novels published up to and throughout the fifties, Africa was itself Camus's *l'étranger,* offering the occasion for knowledge but keeping its own unknowableness intact. Like Marlow's "white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over, mapped since his boyhood with "rivers and lakes and names, [it] had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery. . . . It had become a place of darkness." What little could be known was enigmatic, repugnant, or hopelessly contradictory. Imaginary Africa was a cornucopia of imponderables that like the monstrous Grendel in *Beowulf* resisted explanation. Thus, a plethora of incompatible metaphors can be gleaned from the literature. As the original locus of the human race, Africa is ancient, yet, being under colonial control, it is also infantile. A kind of old fetus always waiting to be born but confounding all midwives. In novel after novel, short story after short story, Africa is simultaneously innocent and corrupting, savage and pure, irrational and wise.

In that racially charged literary context, coming upon Camara Laye's *Le Regard du Roi,* known in English as *The Radiance of the King,* was shocking. Suddenly the clichéd journey into storybook African darkness either to bring light or find it is reimagined. The novel not only summons a sophisticated, wholly African imagistic vocabulary from which to launch a discursive negotiation with the West, it exploits the images of homelessness that the conqueror imposes on the native population: the disorder of Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson;* the obsession with smells in Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika;* the European fixation on the meaning of nakedness as in H. Rider Haggard, or Joseph Conrad, or virtually all travel writing.

Camara Laye's narrative is, briefly, this: Clarence, a European, has come to Africa for reasons he cannot articulate. There, he has gambled, lost, and heavily in debt to his white compatriots, is hiding among the indigenous population in a dirty inn. Already evicted from

the colonists' hotel, about to be evicted by the African innkeeper, Clarence decides the solution to his pennilessness is to be taken into the service of the king. He is prevented by a solid crowd of villagers from approaching the king, and his mission is greeted with scorn. He meets a pair of mischief-loving teenagers and a cunning beggar who agree to help him. Under their guidance he travels south, where the king is expected to appear next. By way of his journey, not wholly unlike a pilgrim's progress, the author is able to trace and parody the parallel sensibilities of Europe and Africa.

The literary tropes of Africa are exact replicas of perceptions of foreignness: (1) threatening, (2) depraved, (3) incomprehensible. And it is fascinating to observe Camara Laye's adroit handling of those perceptions.

1. Threatening. Clarence, his protagonist, is stupefied with fear. In spite of noting that the "forests [are] devoted to the wine industry"; that the landscape is "cultivated"; that the people living there give him a "cordial welcome," he sees only inaccessibility, "common hostility." The order and clarity of the landscape are at odds with the menacing jungle in his head.

2. Depraved. It is Clarence who descends into depravity, enacting the full horror of what Westerners imagine as "going native": the "unclean and cloying weakness" that imperils masculinity. Clarence's blatant enjoyment of and feminine submission to continuous cohabitation reflect his own appetites and his own willful ignorance. As mulatto children crowd the village, Clarence, the only white in the region, continues to wonder where they came from. He refuses to believe the obvious—that he has been sold as stud for the harem.

3. Incomprehensible. Camara Laye's Africa is not dark; it is suffused with light: the watery green light of the forest; the ruby-red tints of the houses and soil; the sky's "unbearable . . . azure brilliance"; even the scales of the fish women "glimmered like robes of dying moonlight." Understanding the motives, the sensibilities of the Africans—both wicked and benign—require only a suspension of belief in an unbreachable difference between humans.

Unpacking the hobbled idioms of the foreigner usurping one's

home, of delegitimizing the native, of reversing claims of belonging, the novel allows us to experience a white man emigrating to Africa, alone, without a job, without authority, without resources or even a family name. But he has one asset that always works, can only work, in third-world countries. He is white, he says, and therefore suited in some ineffable way to be advisor to the king whom he has never seen, in a country he does not know, among people he neither understands nor wishes to. What begins as a quest for a position of authority, for escape from the contempt of his own countrymen becomes a searing process of reeducation. What counts as intelligence among these Africans is not prejudice, but nuance and the ability and willingness to see, to surmise. The European's refusal to meditate cogently on any event except the ones that concern his comfort or survival dooms him. When insight finally seeps through, he feels annihilated by it. This fictional investigation allows us to see the deracing of a Westerner experiencing Africa without European support, protection, or command. Allows us to rediscover or imagine anew what it feels like to be marginal, ignored, superfluous; to have one's name never uttered; to be stripped of history or representation; to be sold or exploited labor for the benefit of a presiding family, a shrewd entrepreneur, a local regime.

It is a disturbing encounter that may help us deal with the destabilizing pressures of the transglobal tread of peoples. Pressure that can make us cling or discredit other cultures, other languages; make us rank evil according to the fashion of the day; make us legislate, expel, conform, purge, and pledge allegiance to ghosts and fantasy. Most of all this pressure can make us deny the foreigner in ourselves and make us resist to the death the commonness of humanity.

After many trials, enlightenment slowly surfaces in Camara Laye's Westerner: Clarence gets his wish to meet the king. But by then he and his purpose have altered. Against the advice of the local people, Clarence crawls naked to the throne. When he finally sees the king, who is a mere boy laden with gold, the "terrifying void that is within [him]," the void that he has been protecting from disclosure, opens to receive the royal gaze. It is this openness, this crumbling of cultural

armor maintained out of fear, this act of unprecedented courage that is the beginning of Clarence's salvation, his bliss and his freedom. Wrapped in the boy king's embrace, feeling the beat of his young heart, Clarence hears him murmur these exquisite words of authentic belonging, words welcoming him to the human race: "Did you not know that I was waiting for you?"