

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Niane

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 18th, 2018

I had been to ‘Africa’ before I had ever set foot there. It was a distorted mirror of that reality though, an unspecified, hazy, refraction of the life that is lived, a representation that the culture industry would have us believe in. I did, of course, have ideas of other places too – ‘India’, ‘Europe’, ‘America’. But ‘Africa’ was congealed in a different way, a place that was enduringly tragic. I grew up during the famines in Ethiopia, the genocide in Rwanda, and that was the mediated presentation of the continent, counterbalanced though it was by the release of Nelson Mandela and the Rugby World Cup in South Africa.

I had been forced to read Joseph Conrad in school, churning through *Heart of Darkness* as a heavy parable for life as a whole, haunted by shadows, the imperial project rotting as one went deeper into a type of white man’s hell. I did not connect the dots and ask why was I presented with this in suburban Australia, nor was I so critical that I could get from Conrad an idea of beautiful prose that had something worthwhile to convey even as one must rebel. I had not yet come across Chinua Achebe’s ‘An Image of Africa’. But ‘Africa’ was already an image in my head, was the ‘basket case’ of the world.

As I grew older, as I read more and went to the distant shores of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Victoria Falls, through the Garden Route and into Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, always a tourist passing through and seeing more, I began to see through the myths of my youth. ‘Africa’ was simply another script, a script that we could read and critique if we wanted to, even as there is some use to leaving in tact the languages and lexicon we have inherited. How does one dismantle what is out there ‘in the world’? How does one open the space for the voices that are complex and difficult to enter into? How does one reply to Conrad and Achebe when one knows so little at all?

I had started, as always, in the wrong place, and I read through Apartheid in South Africa because that was part of the historical moment of my youth. I went from Alan Patton to Nadine Gordimer and then to JM Coetzee. In Coetzee I found an adequate complication, one that turned to imagination as a way to get around his own subjectivity, seen most obviously in a scene with a ‘celebrated African writer’ being critiqued by Elizabeth Costello aboard a cruise ship. Of course, one can, must and does see oneself in a different way, one has empathy enough to step outside the body, but this is grounded in our own experience and our own reading. What we read becomes the foundation for how we imagine, the classics are a type of bedrock among shifting sands even as sometimes we want to swim or be swallowed by quicksand. And so, I read more and differently. I read Ngugi Wa Thiongo and wrote my own paper calling for the abolition of the English department in Australia; I read Ben Okri; I made my way to Ingrid de Kok and Guy Butler. I can

never read as an ‘African’ and not for the reason that no-one can, but because I always read for myself and am not socially recognised as being part of that continent. I can read as an ‘Australian’ in so far as I can be made to be an exceptional representative of this place with some evidence basis.

In Djibril Tamsir Niane’s *The Epic of Sundiata* I found the ‘Africa’ I did not know I was looking for. This was the ‘Africa’ of my youth. This was because there was imagination here, imagination that was like all the imagination of the world, from the root of it in my own reading, which began with a very different shelf – Richard Scarry to Mem Fox to Roald Dahl to R L Stein. Those had been the books of my childhood, but as I stared back across the expanse of my own time, which was all time, I could see in *The Epic of Sundiata*, that I was discovering my self again. I was not an explorer on a continent, not venturing into any place other than the mirror that this text, which was ‘African’, held up to me. In every text, we learn how to read our selves, we learn how to see our selves and who we are a little more, and in that way I could see what was Africa to me if not the world.

From his crippled youth to his asylum seeking to his battle with the sorcerer, Sundiata is a lesson in resistance and unification. But it is also a lesson in storytelling, which is to say it is a lesson in the figure of the griot. I knew the griot tradition before I had read Sundiata, loving the music of Toumani Diabate, Amadou et Mariam, Farka Toure. This was Africa, or Mali, or some geography inside them both and outside them in the archipelago that is the mind, heart and hips alone. It was civilisation itself and with such beauty that I wept when I heard the music go down to my marrow. I thought of the world all the way round and all the tears that make the ocean on which we sail our boats of imagination. Out of that saltwater one knows what it is to be in solidarity together.

It was said by Luis Zukofsky that ‘poetry in its upper register approaches music, in the lower, speech’. But it might be better to suggest that it can also be earthy, that there is a way the lower register finds itself in cave paintings and clay tablets. The paradox is that what I like to hear is what I like to feel, that to be airy one must have soil, not only as land on which to dwell but also to provide a base and an aspiration. That is why the bees work with the worms. The base and that aspiration are imagination, are there in the historical texts and how we interpret them for our present. By looking to *Sundiata*, to the past, to the griot tradition, to the Mali empire, to the stories that are universal because they are local, is a type of Afrofuturism. It is the work of proliferating and continuing to remake and rewrite the ‘African’ for our collective tomorrow. As Binyavanga Wainaina says:

An African global citizen is the inheritor of all the archives.

In those archives are classics and world literature, but there are also spectacles through which we can re-read our selves and the places we long to go in search of truth and hope and beauty as well.

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