

## Writing Africa

Konje Machini

Journal entry from July 26th, 2015

*I'm not sure why I've put off writing for so long. I'm only now doing it because I'm trying to kill time before dinner. I won't say that "killing time" is how I've spent a lot of my evenings but sometimes it's just that. Today I was supposed to go to a primate sanctuary. The plan fell through due to transportation difficulties. Instead went to some markets w/ Frank and after had lunch. This was not before some initial hesitation when Frank told me of a recent bombing by Boko Haram in the far north and a threat made against the president about an attack on Yaoundé. The specter of Boko Haram has haunted many conversations. Just yesterday someone asked the question of me "If I was with them." I replied "yes" thinking he had meant Frank. It's b/c of my hair's length. I think I might cut some of it soon.*

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This is a journal entry from the summer I spent in Cameroon. It's a strange thing, but I can't help but write journal entries as if they will be discovered when I die. So I am always writing for an audience other than future me. Depending on the experience, it does involve some careful doctoring and editing—not necessarily of my own thoughts, but of how I portray them. This process becomes a politics of portrayal whenever I talk, write, or even tweet about the time I spent in Africa. I've been to three different countries on the continent, each further apart from the other as London is to Moscow, yet they are all considered "Africa." Whenever asked,

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“What was it like?” I’m forced to take up a defense of Africa. I am fighting to shed light on that “dark spot” on the globe. I am working against the poverty-porn pictures of smiling kids and statements akin to, “They have so little and yet they are so happy; you be grateful for what you have,”—something I (maybe unfairly) imagine spoken with a thick Mid-Western accent. At least this is the battle I’ve imagined for myself. Imagined or not, this is my

attempt to talk about this Africa. To do so, I’m not talking about my experiences in Africa, or Cameroon, or even Yaoundé, Cameroon, but rather the specific places, spaces, and faces I saw and engaged with. Ultimately, this is my story of dealing with difficulties as an American-born African trying to reconcile his own American-ness with his African identity.

### **Morocco**

The summer of ‘14 I spent in Rabat, Morocco. It was the most racially aware I’ve ever been. It’s not as if growing up black in the South, and going to the University of Chicago haven’t been training enough. I think it was just the fear that comes along with being dropped in a new place without a proper briefing beforehand. I was expected to play my part perfectly, but no one gave me the script. Part of the discomfort stemmed from grasping to understand my relational identity—that is, what I think other people saw when they saw me. One might kindly call this racial awareness, or unkindly frame it as racial paranoia. Either way, it’s all about your making calculations on how you are being or might be perceived. These dialogues are always internal and are rarely resolved. In Chicago and around Hyde Park I have my formula down. Being thrown into Morocco required some slight tweaking. After a while, I thought I had it figured out. When I was walking with other English-speaking foreigners I was black American—by myself I was black African. Being in Morocco took all my anxieties about identity as the son of Kenyan

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immigrants and threw them back in my face repeatedly, and occasionally with humor. In the famed souks of Fez, and Marrakech I was saved doing the messy guesswork of how I was seen; the vendors took to calling tourists the names of celebrities they vaguely resembled. I was Danny Welbeck, the English footballer at Arsenal, I was *Training Day* Denzel Washington, 2008 Barack Obama, and much to my

annoyance, Chris Brown. These moments felt more playful than offensive. This was me as black American.

I remember my first moment of being interpolated as black African. It was early on in my time in Morocco, and it was part of an interaction I've become quite familiar with. This is the habit of showing some sign of recognition—a smile, head nod, “hello”—to other black folks I come across in non-black-folk spaces. A subtle reminder to myself and the other person that we're not alone here. A rather innocuous smile at a black man who looked about my age, sparked a conversation. He was from Senegal and had assumed I was, too. After clearing things up we talked for a bit. Still fresh to the city, I was eager for an insider's take. Instead I got a response of an outsider, or at least of somebody locked out of the inside. It was not easy being black in Rabat. Although I was in Africa, this was not the Africa I had imagined.

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### Cameroon

I spent part of the summer of '15 in Cameroon for an internship, working as a research assistant at a hospital in the capital, Yaoundé. My time working was spent tooling around on Excel, organizing folders, and loading my TV shows using the office Wi-Fi. I stayed in the hospital district of the city, in a dorm of the hospital where I worked. My first day at the hospital, I was paraded around as the American student doing research in the oncology department. Mistakenly, I was described as a medical student and not a lowly premed, a distinction that took some work on my part to explain. A bout of jet lag put me down at 2 p.m. the previous day only to wake up that night at 9, forfeiting my chances at dinner. Sleepy, hungry, scared, I wandered the hospital with my mentor. He was one of *les Grandes* of Cameroon. That, I quickly learned meant that he was very important and very busy. I didn't see much of him. The faces I saw were that of Yolande, Frank, and Dr. Carlson, all black.

I went my first week and a half in Cameroon without seeing a white person. There were black people for days! Black doctors, black taxi drivers, black bakers, black business people. I tried and failed several times to explain just how exciting this all was to my coworkers, who simply looked at me with faces that read as a mix between, "Yes, it's great," and, "Yes, what the hell were you expecting?" This was the Africa I had imagined and that had been imagined for me. I was just another face in a crowd—happily, I might add. There's a graphic novel called *Incognegro*, about an investigative journalist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who's black but can pass for white. Using this superpower, he investigates lynchings in the South. I, too, acquired this ability to go incognegro. In Cameroon I was no longer Chris Brown, or Danny Welbeck. I was Konjé (well, I was still Obama—but that only came up when my Kenyan and American heritage entered the conversation, and I was definitely okay with this comparison). Regardless, I was just another person walking around and doing my thing, no more or less suspicious or out-of-place.

At least, that was the case sometimes. Cameroon is bilingual—English in a small region in the west and French elsewhere. I was elsewhere and had to speak French. My French is good, but certainly not fluent. On top of that, my accent is tinged with inflections

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from Georgia, France, and Morocco, not ideal for Cameroon. All this meant that I stood a good chance of not sticking out until the moment I opened my mouth. If I kept the interaction short, I was golden—a curt, “Hello, how do you do?” would suffice as long as I moved quickly enough. But even this deception would sometimes fall apart. I found myself registering the look of confusion on a face, mixed with betrayal and a dash of embarrassment whenever I had to say more and reveal my secret identity. Maybe this was not my Africa.

I remember a conversation with my coworker Yolande in which she remarked that I dressed simply. This confused me because it sounded like an insult, but the smile on her face and every other interaction with her told me this wasn't the case. After some deliberation and further explanation I got what she was trying to say: I didn't dress like what she expected a black American to dress like! This was not a hurtful realization by any means. It was instructive, a reminder of the fact that I was American. Like in Morocco, I was always trying to figure out exactly where I stood in other people's eyes. Often their expectations didn't match up with reality, just like my own for Cameroon.



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Everyone who lives in Yaoundé, even if they were born there, has a house in the village. My friend Frank was no exception, and one weekend he invited me to go along for a visit to his family. I was excited to leave the city as the village offered promises of adventure. By coincidence, I had taken up an interest in anthropological writings on African witchcraft that summer. Anthropology as a discipline is kind of obsessed with witches. While many authors argue for the presence of witchcraft in the city as much as in the village, my friend Frank expressed a particular fear of village witchcraft, so I had to see for myself. That, along with promises of a meal of snake, meant that my village trip would be “truly memorable.” We arrived at his family’s place without much fanfare, after a fifteen-minute moto ride on a dirt road with four grown men carefully packed onboard. His cousin and her son were the only ones home. The compound included two structures, a house where people slept and another where food was stored and cooked. There was no electricity or running water. We had a small dinner of plantain, fish stew, and prunes, which we had knocked down from the tree growing in front of the house. After dinner we left. There was a complete quietness and a darkness like I hadn’t experienced before. There were no witches. We ate no snake.

### **Kenya**

My plan after leaving Cameroon was to go to Kenya. Looking at how easy it is for one to travel from one place to another can give you a good idea of how a built environment structures where and how you can move. Think of the ways public transport in the city of Chicago works, with the proliferation of lines on the North Side, but with only a handful on the South. Just getting from Hyde Park to any neighborhood to the west requires you to first go to the Loop and then to your destination. A similar problem exists in Africa for intracontinental travel. These flights are not only costly, but will often have layovers in the metropole—London, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, and the new player, Dubai. Getting from Yaoundé to Nairobi was not looking easy. Google Maps suggested driving would take a cool fifty-eight hours. So instead I flew.

If Cameroon was visiting the old neighborhood where you used to live, travelling to Kenya was having Sunday dinner at the house you grew up in. Not only was this my first time visiting, but the

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first time any of my siblings were making the trip since my family left Kenya. The prodigal grandson, nephew, cousin, second cousin, returns, or rather just comes.

My delayed travel was not for a lack of trying but instead a lack of resources. Whenever anyone asks me the loaded question, “Where are you from?” I do a quick calculus. One, whether they are asking where I am from or where I am *from*. Two, whether or not I want to ignore the latter insinuation and coolly respond “Metropolitan Atlanta.” Three, if they insist on the “*from*,” asking myself if they will then go with the follow up of, “Oh! Have you ever been?” It was this last question that always managed to tear at the seams of my identity suit. Seams would completely unravel whenever a friend, or acquaintance would talk about going Kenya under the auspices of a service trip or safari. Who were these people to see my country before I did? It didn’t matter: I was finally going to see the place myself, and I was dead set on getting more out of it than a picture with a bunch of smiling African children or a selfie with a giraffe. I ended up doing both.

Before getting to Kenya I was aware of my family there: names, pictures, the occasional visit, and the increasingly frequent friend request. These interactions went into forming a piecemeal image, but never really coalesced into a coherent picture of who made up my family. I had the scraps of an unfinished quilt. In order to finish it, my detail-oriented uncle drew up an itinerary for me. I was to cross the country and back over the course of about three weeks, meeting some forty or so family members.

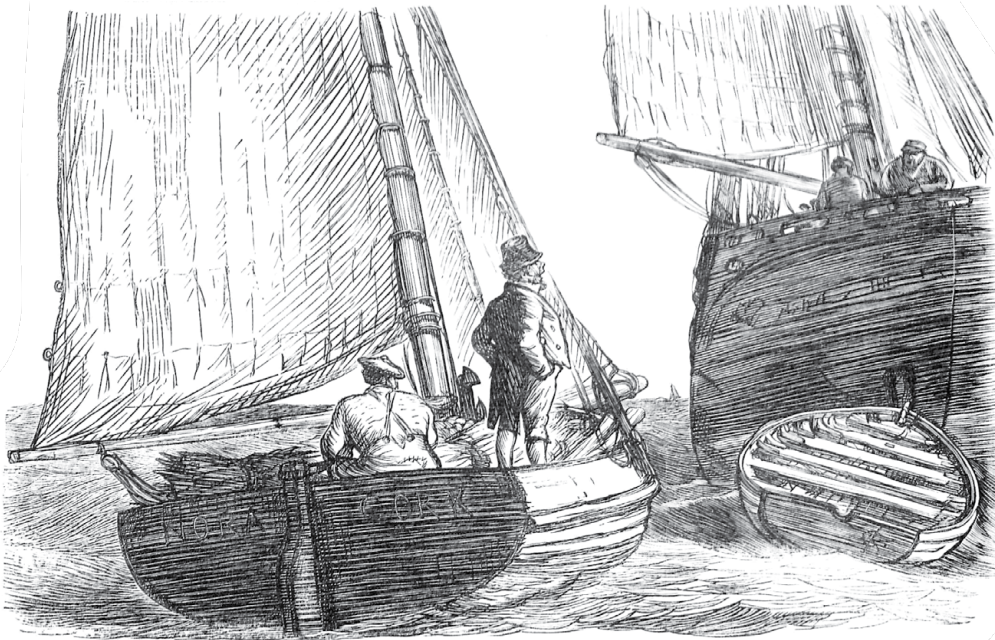
Being the first branch of the family to move to America and the only ones there for some time, I feel like we were afforded some notoriety as we became known as the American cousins. They knew who I was, and while I had an idea of who a lot of them were, I clearly had some catching up to do. My guides on this journey were my two cousins from my dad’s side, Abby and Iyan. It’s a weird thing meeting family for the first time. Everything happens at an accelerated pace, a full range: comfort, discomfort, annoyance, love, laughter. With Abby and Iyan, and most all of my family, this was the case. As we travelled from home to home, having more than

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our fair share of chapatti and chai, we got to know each other well. We did it all—safaris, dance clubs, the beach. To borrow a phrase from Study Abroad brochures, this was easily my most immersive travel experience. I had nobody with me who had the same set of references I did. This meant that most of my jokes never landed, and on top of that I was left out of all jokes cracked in Swahili. I weirdly found myself in the position of defending America and my way of life to my cousins. To finish with the language of immersion, I was chest-deep in Kenya and was not as strong a swimmer as I thought.

At some point in my travels I took leave of my two trusty guides to visit my mother's family in the west of Kenya, near Lake Victoria. This part of the country greatly differs from the deliciously green rolling hills of my father's land. It was muddy, but oddly dry, cool, but hot. The lake dominated the landscape in an understated way. It was if the lake was self-aware and so confident in its own size and beauty that it wasn't compelled to scream at us for attention—a sleepy, disinterested giant. It was stunning.

It was here that I met my cousins from my mother's late sister Maureen. Their parents both died some years ago, and now the



The Golden Ships were not much heavier than ours of Wood.



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oldest girl, a year younger than me, takes care of her two younger brothers with the help of our aunts and uncle. I travelled there with my mother's sister and her son, my cousin. We were to stay at the home of my mom's cousin. The house was a few miles from Lake Victoria, but even closer to another, much smaller lake—Lake Simbi. It sat in a crater of sorts and was surrounded on all sides by a low cliff. When I saw the lake, there was a thin sheet of resting flamingos, not quite the highlighter-pink of lawn ornaments, but closer to Pepto-Bismol. All this was down the street from "Obama Road." Yes, that Obama. This is the part of the country where our president's father was born, aka Obamaland.

I had come here to visit the place where my mother had grown up. While driving around the area I was given brief history lessons about my mom's own life, sprinkled in with some Obama family trivia. The house where my mom grew up was a bit further from where we were staying. We spent a day at my mom's ancestral home, so to speak. Her step-mother insisted on preparing us a meal of chicken stew before we returned. At the house we were stayed we spent most of our time playing outside because there was no electricity. It acted as an easy sort of social lubricant between the boys and me. But this didn't really work with my cousin Francissca, with whom I only managed to connect on my last day.

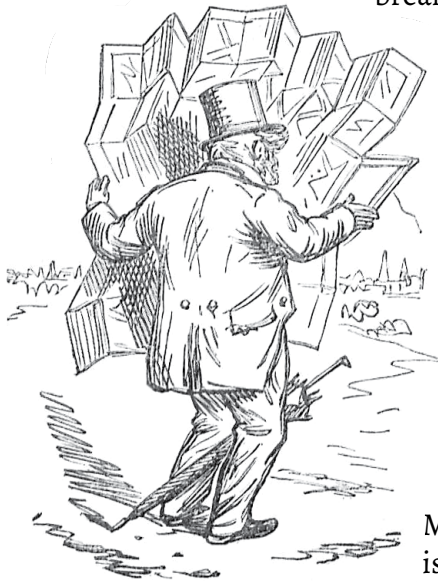
The last day I was there was also her birthday. Whenever it is my birthday, my mom always gives me money equal to my age. My cousin was turning twenty, so I figured I keep the tradition alive as my mom's representative. I found the money and wrote a brief birthday note on a postcard I had been saving for a rainy day from Morocco. As I said my goodbyes to her, I gave her the gift. She thanked me and I continued saying goodbye to the rest of my cousins. Departure in Kenya is less a discrete moment and more of a process, so we were around for quite some time after saying our preliminary goodbyes. Before we actually left, Francissca came back to me, crying. I was briefly thrown off, and was unsure of what was wrong. She managed to get out between sobs, explaining to me that this was her first birthday present ever. I really didn't know what to feel.

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I remember lamely consoling her. I remember thinking, *Should I have given more? Less? At all? Why do I feel such a deep ache? Because you don't deserve this gratitude, because you have not really been there for her until this moment, and because you now feel tied to her and her brother's future. Because interdependence scares you a lot, because you prize your independence: because you are American.*

I didn't share any of these thoughts with her or anyone back home for a while. I felt ugly and ashamed, guilty. It was this feeling of guilt that repulsed me. It was this guilt—and its nasty relative “burden”—that spurned and motivated so many before me to go “save” the continent. Why the hell did twenty dollars give me so much pause? How did I get sucked into the very thinking I wanted to destabilize? How much of a critique could I make from within the very mindset? I was stuck doing complex mental judo between my American and my African identity.

This moment of crisis was my response to a burden of representation, the immense task of writing against years of accumulated images of a dark continent. I was censoring and filtering all my thoughts, reactions, and emotions so as not to represent Africa as it had already been presented. This was the burden of having perfect politics while navigating a world that was a break from what I had experienced before.



Very good Navigators they were.

It made me want to avoid talking about going to the village, the souk, the safari, for fear of reifying an image of the exotic. It pushed me away from discussing feelings of alienation in Kenya, Morocco, and Cameroon for fear of losing my claim to Africanness. All these conflicts left me mute. In staying silent on this idea of Africa, I was giving power to that image.

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe says that Africa, discursively, is always relational—opposed to the

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West. As relational, the images or expectations of Africa then reveal more about the person imagining than the real place. What did my own expectations about Africa reveal about me? I was looking for a place where I belonged. In Morocco I couldn't find this. In Cameroon, I knew I came close. And in Kenya, I realized what it was I was looking for: these people, my family who were only names before they had sprouted faces, bodies, personalities all in the course of three weeks. They welcomed

me warmly and relentlessly and tried to make Kenya, Africa a home to me. My travels in Africa have not led to the sudden discovery of my African self, but rather have been instructive moments in an ongoing process of understanding that part of myself, along with my many others. I am still figuring out, and will be for a while, what any of this means.

My last day in Kenya was as remarkable as the rest, even if it was spent packing and repacking my bags as opposed to lounging on the beach or spotting lions. The process of my departure was an all-day affair. Aunts, uncles, and cousins sprinkled across Nairobi all gathered to see me off. We ate and laughed and took many photos. When it was time to roll out, I was surprised to discover that all twenty or so of us would be headed to the airport in four different cars. This was truly a kingly send-off. I think that prior to visiting, I would have been annoyed by a gesture like this (logistics aside). But I felt so honored. We all huddled together in line—I didn't have to carry a single bag up to the door. With twenty hugs and a promise to return, I left Kenya.