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Translation Sample

Rumors of America

translated by Kate Deimling

"Everyone has their own America and  
then they have pieces of a fantasy America that they think  
is out there but they can't see."

Andy Warhol

## **My America:**

### **Between Fantasy and Reality**

I moved to downtown L.A. almost a year ago, and I enjoy writing here, on my balcony, where I've created a tropical atmosphere with lots of plants in colorful pots.

This is my habit now. First thing in the morning, with a mug of Triple Leaf tea in one hand and a spiral notebook in the other, I go to my perch to scribble for as long as my college teaching schedule will allow. The narrow space can hardly fit two or three people. But I've arranged it with special attention and an exaggerated sense of detail, which my friends make fun of.

This morning, looking at my notebook, I dare to open wide the doors to my America for the first time. Up until now, most of my books have dealt with my homeland, Congo-Brazzaville, or relations between France and Africa, except for a few essays, such as *Letter to Jimmy*, about the African-American writer James Baldwin, or *The Tears of the Black Man*, which was partly about relations between Africans and African-Americans.

So perhaps I should say that my books occupy the geography imposed by my migrations between Africa, Europe, and now America. Each of these areas appears during the day, but melds into others at nightfall, creating my identity as a person in flux, encountering the Other.

Without getting distracted by the plane flying very low in the sky over my new neighborhood, Mid-Wilshire, I take stock of the time that has passed. It took me fifteen years or

so to finally focus my attention on someplace other than my homeland, Congo, or my adoptive country, France. I can only explain this procrastination by the need to avoid forcing things, to wait for them to ripen, so that they naturally connect with my creative world when the time is right.

By writing about America, I'm still not abandoning Congo-Brazzaville, which I lug around day and night like the tortoise Kalala, who carries his shell without feeling its weight, being careful to protect it from wind and water because it is his ultimate home. Nor have I ditched France, where I lived for seventeen years, almost as long as I lived in Congo, and where I have unbreakable bonds.

I've even accepted the ungrateful task of justifying myself to certain Americans who ask me why I write in French when it is not the language of my home continent. Though, in fact, this lesson is not really so hard, for, as soon as I say the word "colonization," the Americans' faces light up with curiosity, especially when I explain that, decades later, debates regarding the consequences and the history of colonialism are still ongoing in France.

But it doesn't matter — in America, I'm an African. And I'm also aware of the clouds that hover over my relations with African-Americans. I've heard here and there that some African-Americans accuse us Africans of having colluded with the slave ships that deported their ancestors, eternally marking us as traitors.

Of course, these controversies have their place in our era, but I'll say it loud and clear: my debt to the African-American world goes far beyond what I get out of these confrontational,

preachy encounters. I'm grateful to writers and activists. With power and intelligence, they shaped the face of black America as transfigured by the struggle for civil rights.

Their names are Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Octavia E. Butler, Rosa Parks, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Marcus Garvey, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou. They have refueled my pride. They have glorified and elevated the continent from which their ancestors were dragged away in one of the most tragic episodes of History.

Nor am I unaware of the white people who lost their lives by revealing our condition to the world. I'm thinking, for instance, of the French journalist Paul Guihard, who was murdered on September 30, 1962 while he was covering a historic event: the American Supreme Court had upheld the right of a black American, James Meredith, to attend the University of Mississippi.

And what about Juliette Hampton Morgan, who lived in Alabama, the nerve center of the struggle against segregation. This librarian decided to ignore her privileges as a white woman in order to embrace the cause of black Americans, and she played a decisive role. She did not hesitate to support Rosa Parks in the press, who was herself a heroic figure, refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white person. This act of non-violence would have a ripple effect resulting in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, led by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. There he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech to an audience of over 250,000 people.

I could also counter divisive opinions by pointing out how black Americans inspired the Negritude movement in Africa. In the 1930s, this literary, political, and artistic movement

celebrated African civilizations and led to the independence of African nations. This is a legacy that we preserve and renew, each in our own way, wherever we may be, because the world now requires new interpretive frameworks.

Basically, when I hear about Africans' complicity in slavery, instead of arguing, I prefer to reread one of the illustrious African-American intellectuals who are closest to us, LeRoi Jones, known as Amiri Baraka, who died in 2014.

Baraka identified another kind of complicity. He saw that part of his own community was inclined to erase its color in order to preserve its socio-economic interests. In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, he did not mince words: "It was the growing black middle class who believed that the best way to survive in America would be to disappear completely, leaving no trace at all that there had ever been an Africa, or a slavery, or even, finally, a black man."

And because I refuse to be confined under house arrest, I'll add that my America is not limited to its depiction by black American writers and activists. I don't read American authors only after checking the pigmentation of their skin, or in an attempt to filter my vision of the world through a single color.

When I attended Lycée Karl-Marx in Pointe-Noire, I thought that the author of *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner, was black. I didn't think to look for a photo of the writer, nor did I really care — I was moved by his world, his social vision of the American South, which was a topic of conversation with my father, Papa Roger, and most of all I felt in my flesh the dizzying movement of his style.

I searched encyclopedias tirelessly for the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, this "postage stamp" with infinite dimensions, located somewhere in Mississippi. When I went to the U.S., I even went to Lafayette County, which they say inspired Faulkner when he created his fictional world. I came back empty-handed and ended my stay in New Orleans, listening to jazz at the Blue Nile on Frenchman Street.

Also in high school, I followed Ishmael onto the high seas, getting on board Captain Ahab's whaling ship *Pequod*. *Moby Dick* blew me away, thanks to a writer of Dutch and Scottish heritage, Herman Melville, and the irresistible brilliance of his narration.

In the library of the French Cultural Center in Pointe-Noire (the ancestor of the French Institute), I felt at home. Sometimes, the manager would catch me at closing time staring at a photo of Mark Twain and his bushy moustache. I was still unaware of Ernest Hemingway's statement that all modern American literature comes from *Huckleberry Finn*, and I unreservedly share this opinion now that I have reread it in English.

It was thanks to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* that I understood what friendship could mean. With Flannery O'Connor, that gifted, grumpy child of the South, whose stories are full of the spinelessness of poor whites, their violence, and their sordid crimes, I was finally convinced that places ravaged by conflict give rise to the greatest writers. What about the fearlessness of Vladimir Nabokov, switching from Russian to English? Recently, the American novelist, short story writer, and essayist Jhumpa Lahiri moved to Italy and decided to stop writing in English in order to learn Italian, thus abandoning the language that made her career in the English-speaking world. What could be a bolder act for a writer?

My America is a land where the exiled became the standard-bearers of the nation and its pride. Hungarian journalist Joseph Pulitzer, who gave his name to the country's most prestigious literary award; the German Levi-Strauss, who dressed the whole world in blue jeans of his invention; Albert Einstein, the roaming physicist, who was in turn stateless, Italian, Swiss, Austrian, Belgian, and American. A land where Africans could be proud of the career of Dikembe Mutombo, a basketball player born in Zaïre (Democratic Republic of the Congo). Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright is from the former Czechoslovakia. Designer Oscar de la Renta hails from the Dominican Republic. Arianna Huffington, who founded the *Huffington Post* and is considered one of the 100 most influential people in the world, has roots in Greece.

My America is Hollywood overflowing with the descendants of immigrants who delight audiences and make hits for studios: Pamela Anderson and Jim Carrey (Canada), Natalie Portman (Israel), Nicole Kidman (Australia), Charlize Theron (South Africa), Arnold Schwarzenegger (Austria), Djimon Hounsou (Benin), Lupita Nyong'o (Kenya), Chiwetel Ejiofor (Nigeria), Chipu Chung (Tanzania), not counting the great "Italian wave" of influential actors and producers, including Martin Scorsese, Sofia Coppola, Francis Ford Coppola, Al Pacino, Quentin Tarantino, Robert De Niro, Sean Penn, Joe Pesci, Brian De Palma, Susan Sarandon, Jennifer Aniston, Bradley Cooper, Sylvester Stallone, Vin Diesel, and John Travolta.

When I scan the shelves of my library, tracing the peregrinations and places of exile of writers I admire, such as Irish writer James Joyce (Switzerland), Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (Switzerland), or the Germans Thomas Mann (Italy, Switzerland, the U.S.) and Bertolt



Brecht (Scandinavia and the U.S.), I tell myself that much of modern literature was written by individuals who, for reasons of politics, language, or simply for peace of mind, chose to settle outside the borders of their home countries. And I am doing the same.

I belong, of course, to the generation of African writers who immigrated to France in the 1990s. But I now feel close to creative voices from all over the world for whom the United States is a springboard: Azar Nafisi (Iran), Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie (Nigeria), Khaled Hosseini (Afghanistan), Ha Jin (China), Art Spiegelman (Sweden, with parents from Poland), or Cristina García (Cuba).

Yes, I'm writing about "my America" from my California balcony, and it has a long view, all the way to the bars in the Marx-Dormoy neighborhood of Paris or to my mother's wooden house in the Voungou neighborhood in Pointe-Noire.

Here, I blend into the crowd, feeling the pulse of those who are the same color as me, and those who are different from me, whom I deal with on a daily basis. Some places in California and Michigan whisper their stories to me because I know them intimately. Others resist, and occasionally I must excavate a long time to finally see their true faces appear. But this journey has meaning only if it's personal and subjective, somewhere between personal history and History with a capital H, between the immense and the miniscule. And maybe, without even realizing it, I'm writing what I could call my American autobiography, between the mirages of the imaginary, the surprising twists of the unexpected, the digressions of anecdotes, and the rawness of reality.

This is what my America is like.



## From Santa Monica to Los Angeles

Ever since I left Santa Monica for downtown LA, I've been trying to dismiss its image from my mind, but it obsesses me still.

Yesterday, I rushed out of the house and got in my car just so I could have the pleasure of walking around there again, and, secretly, find a little bit of peace. This morning, I'm resisting the temptation and staying on my balcony. So I'm writing.

In Santa Monica, I lived at the corner of Montana Avenue and 16th Street. It was a short drive to the airport, which took me back to France regularly, and even closer to UCLA: I just walked through Westwood Village along Veteran Avenue, took Sunset Boulevard, and then the brown brick buildings would appear.

When I moved here from Michigan in 2006, I had no inkling that Santa Monica would win me over. It seemed too quiet, too orderly, too otherworldly to be real. No skyscrapers blocking the view as in New York, no sheets of snow or giant smokestacks spewing industrial fumes as in Michigan. Endless avenues were fastidiously maintained by omnipresent city workers. Smoking was banned on the popular 3rd Street Promenade. Everything was green, with parks wherever you looked, making you want to lounge in the sunshine all afternoon. There was a cycling path that went several miles to Venice Beach. All this, plus one of the most beautiful Pacific beaches around. It's no wonder that the hit show *Baywatch* was filmed here. Hundreds of movie producers seek permission to shoot in Santa Monica every year.

With 75 museums and galleries and many movie theaters dotting the streets, it was quite a different scene from Ann Arbor, where I had lived in Michigan, which by comparison seemed an aging, isolated little place.

In Santa Monica, no more cold, no more endless winters that disorient you and deeply change you. No more shoveling snow in front of your house every day — and if you slack off, you could be sued if someone falls and cracks their head on your sidewalk. No more bundling up ridiculously like a shaggy bison on two legs — a true insult to a Congolese dandy's sense of style. Now I lived in a mild climate, similar to my homeland in Africa. Gentle sunshine. The sound of the waves. Paradise.

To fully enjoy one of the wealthiest cities in the United States, I would sometimes sit on a bench on Ocean Avenue watching fancy luxury cars pass by, the likes of which I'd never seen in my life. One of them probably contained Sandra Bullock, Christian Bale, Tom Cruise, or some other movie star who'd gotten tired of the poseurs and paparazzi of Hollywood or Beverly Hills and found refuge in Santa Monica.

Sometimes, between the rows of cars at the red light, I'd suddenly see a disheveled head that clashed with this landscape. Even though they were much less common than in downtown Los Angeles, I did sometimes run into homeless people. Most of them were white, and came from far away, they told me — places like Ohio, Alabama, Maine, or South Carolina. The black ones came from even farther away: Ghana, Nigeria, or Kenya.

I'd see them in groups in front of grocery stores or gas stations. One of these Africans spoke French. Babacar was from Senegal. He didn't beg and he didn't bother anyone, but just sat

all day in front of a CVS pharmacy on Santa Monica Boulevard, hoping for a heartfelt gesture from a passerby that would spare him the humiliation of holding out his hand or his little tin cup. He reminded me of the outcasts in *The Beggars' Strike* by Senegalese writer Aminata Sow Fall. "The Dregs of Humanity" is the subtitle of this novel about a beggars' revolt against politicians who have expelled them from the streets in order to spare the tourists this shameful image of the city.

In popular African culture and belief, giving money to the "dregs of humanity" brings luck, health, and prosperity. In West Africa, beggars have a kind of social status, regulated by customs and traditions. These men don't inspire pity, but respect, as they are believed to be mediators with our ancestors and the gods.

Although he was far from home, Babacar had maintained a sense of dignity from his homeland that he took to the extreme: he didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't do drugs. With his water bottle always in hand, as soon as he got a few bills, he walked to the nearby Subway to buy a sandwich. He was an upstanding homeless person.

This man and those like him found themselves in a city of brazen wealth with beautiful buildings that left them only a space as small as a phone booth for their survival. They knew the city's geography, and they realized it wasn't the ideal place to panhandle. Except for the 3rd Street Promenade and Ocean Avenue, which overflow with tourists from all over the world, Santa Monica isn't big on walking. Everyone travels by car. So, waiting for a red light at the intersection, they would approach drivers. It didn't work every time, you can be sure.

I suggested to Babacar that he should move to Los Angeles, but he preferred the travails of Santa Monica to dealing with the competition of downtown LA, where druggies, ex-cons, and the mentally ill could make things rough, even protecting their turf with guns or satisfying their criminal impulses on other pariahs. It was hard in Santa Monica, but at least Babacar sometimes received "significant amounts" (by which he meant a ten-dollar bill).

And like Babacar, who stayed in Santa Monica despite the limited opportunities for panhandling, it took me a long time to leave this place, where I had written most of my novels and essays.

Did I *really* betray this city by leaving?

All the evidence is against me. It was like a stab in the back to the city that was the source of my first memories of California. Santa Monica had become my favorite lover, she held her arms open to me with pure affection, and every time I left her to spend the summer in Paris, I felt a twinge of guilt. I can even say — and my nostalgia is almost painful as I write these words this morning — Santa Monica has the same place in my heart as my hometown in Congo, Pointe-Noire, and my adoptive city, Paris.

As I write these lines, I see the first inhabitants of Santa Monica, Native Americans of the Tongvas tribe, and I hear the heavy boots of the Spanish, who arrived starting in the 18th century. At that time, Santa Monica was in the hands of the colonizers, led by the Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolà, who appears to me in the form of a very old tree. At the base of this tree, I see stranded dead leaves. These dry, brittle leaves represent the punishment of the indigenous people,

whose descendants, today, are foreigners on the land of their ancestors and represent only a tiny portion of the population.

Yet the dark continent is still here. On every street corner. The name Santa Monica comes from Monica of Hippo, a Berber who is recognized as a saint by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. She was the mother of Saint Augustine, who — if I can make this connection without offending the sensibilities of historians — was an African, because he was born in what was then called the "province of Africa," which included what is now Tunisia and some parts of Libya and Egypt.

Yes, Santa Monica is a little Africa without black people. I didn't see any in the neighborhood of the one-bedroom apartment I rented. I hardly ever ran into those who lived in the surrounding area and came to church on Sundays at St. Paul's Lutheran Church on Lincoln Boulevard. Oh, I'm not forgetting the black folks who worked at Vons Supermarket on Wilshire Boulevard and the 7 Eleven on Santa Monica Boulevard. There I met another homeless African man. He was from Nigeria and taught me basic pidgin when I was translating *Beasts of No Nation*, a novel by the Nigerian writer Uzodinma Iweala, from English into French. I made sure to give him a copy of it in English.

The tacit exclusion of blacks from Santa Monica reinforces my decision to have left it for Los Angeles. Either the city selects its inhabitants, or it attracts a certain type of resident. The population is almost 77% white, 10% Latino, and 4% African-American. Who is missing from this calculation? Those whose race is not "clearly" identified. They are counted as "other

racess" (3.4%) or almost invisible minorities such as Native American (0.3%) or Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (0.1%).

When I went to Inglewood — the California city with the highest black population — the "sisters" and "brothers" thought I was an "upper-class Negro" who hobnobbed with white people. Conversely, the white people in my neighborhood thought I was lucky to have escaped the destiny of African-Americans who suffered from laziness and engaged in criminal activity. I could see the relief on their faces when I entered R + D Kitchen on Montana Avenue or the Marmalade Cafe dressed to the nines.

If they saw me at a table writing, the white people would indulge their curiosity and ask me what I *really* did for a living (besides being black 24/7). I would reply that I was a literature professor at UCLA. And I'd suddenly see tranquility spread over their faces as they did their best to hide it by paying me exaggerated compliments. I wasn't like the "others," so I was no longer a threat to their interests or the continuation of their racial, social, and economic domination. I turned into the perfect alibi, the winning argument to toss in the face of those who criticized Santa Monica for lacking racial diversity.

There, I was aware of standing out, and I played it up when I went to these chic restaurants where everyone was rich, elegant, and white. With my Stetson cap firmly planted on my head, I couldn't go unnoticed, and the waitresses never failed to make playful comments letting me know they liked my outfit. At the bar, I'd order a glass of Grand Marnier on ice while waiting for my table, which was always the same one in the corner.



The walls of R + D Kitchen are covered with photos of movie stars like Robert Redford, John Wayne, Grace Kelly, Natalie Wood, Jayne Mansfield, and Marilyn Monroe. At the little table where I sat, I was surrounded by pictures of Robert Kiel (known for his gold teeth in the James Bond flick *The Spy Who Loved Me*), Larry Hagman (who played J.R. Ewing on *Dallas*), and Gary Sinise in *The Green Mile* (based on a Stephen King novel), playing Burt Hammersmith, a racist lawyer prosecuting John Coffey, the black giant with supernatural powers who is accused of murdering two white girls. There were also photos of Sinise as Dan Taylor, a Vietnam vet in *Forrest Gump*. I especially liked seeing the photos of Sinise, because he directed and produced *Of Mice and Men*.

The waitresses called me "the Parisian" because of my accent, which seems French to Americans and African to the French, and also because of my clothing, which was quite the opposite of what their other customers wore. In fact, I was stunned by the uniformity of style I saw around me. The men wore dark suits, the younger ones in Giorgio Armani or Guess jeans, white V-neck t-shirts, and Gucci or Dolce & Gabbana sneakers. The women sported satin minidresses recalling 1980s Hollywood, with plunging necklines and stork feathers or beads around the neck. There was a striking contrast when I showed up in an orange or purple Borsalino suit with my Weston shoes polished to a high shine.

On the weekend, I'd go for the "demi-Dakar," which, in Congolese dandy slang, means that the pants and jacket are made of different fabrics. This delicate combination requires skill in coordinating colors, since each piece has to match something else: the pocket square, the Eiffel Tower or Arc de Triomphe cufflinks, the Jacquard socks, thick-framed Emmanuelle Khanh

sunglasses, and my Stetson or Bailey cap. The waitresses didn't hesitate to ask me the name of my cologne or my stylist, and when I told them that everything I was wearing was from Paris, they said in unison, "Of course, Paris!"

If they had known that my Parisian stylist Jocelyn Le Bachelor was Congolese, I would have rated even higher in their book.

But that's all in the past — I haven't set foot in that restaurant for years.