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## Out of Africa

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Panel: Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile (II)

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**Peter Kimani**  
**Out of Africa**

The title of my presentation, *Out of Africa*, evokes the popular novel by the same title by the Danish writer, Karen Blixen, also known as Isak Dinesen, who made a home in Kenya at the beginning of the last century.

Blixen spent her youthful days attempting to harness – without much success, it should be clarified – the volcanic fertile soils in Kenya to grow coffee. The circumstances of Blixen’s sojourn to what was then British East Africa remain unclear, although the rumors of war in Europe and the lure of cheap or free labor in the “virgin lands” was enough motivation to lead a young European just starting life to explore, as it would the British colonizers who arrived there only two decades earlier.

Blixen’s long sojourn in Kenya – lasting seventeen years in all – yielded little, her agricultural enterprise failed and she ultimately closed shop and returned to Denmark where she wrote *Out of Africa*, which recorded her memories of Kenya. The book made her famous and wealthy and, over time, *Out of Africa* has evolved from a simple tale of wanderlust to a classic travelogue – its prejudices notwithstanding.

But that’s beside the point. This *Out of Africa* exhortation is largely accidental. After all, Karen Blixen was exiled in Kenya between 1914 and 1931, and her work falls within the realm of the writing I am exploring today: writing in an age of migration, Diaspora and exile.

It would be a good thing to start by exploring another migration, possibly the world’s largest, which entailed a forcible removal of millions of African people from their homeland and their shipping away to the United States, the Americas and Europe, where they worked as slaves.

One of the most eloquent articulators of that “*Out of Africa*” experience was Olaudah Equiano, who was kidnapped with his sister at the age of 11, sold by local slave traders and shipped across the Atlantic to Barbados and then to Virginia in the United States.

Equiano was later sold to a number of masters and ended up as a deckhand, valet and barber in London, where he traded on the side while serving his master. In three short years, he saved enough money to buy his own freedom.

His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, came out in 1789, and was possibly the earliest book by an African.

Equiano then spent much of the next 20 years traveling the world promoting the book and campaigning for the abolition of slave trade, the ills of which he exposed in the engaging autobiography.

There are no parallels, of course, between Blixen and Equiano. One was free, the other, a serf. Yet their stories dramatize a yearning to capture memory of place. Blixen sought to explain her affection for her environment, which included the people within it, of whom she wrote condescendingly. Equiano recounted memories of beauty and terror and of the pain of dislocation, having been plucked from his roots.

Nearly 100 years after Equiano's book, the British would set foot in Kenya and redefine slavery once again. Since slavery had been abolished, the next great thing, they reasoned, was to reintroduce slavery by taking away the people's land so they could sell their labor. The people tilled the land but never owned its produce.

Those who resisted were rounded up and put in concentration camps while the leaders were exiled to harsh terrains in faraway corners of the country. The heroine of the Giriama people, Me Katilili, who led the revolt against the British at the Kenyan coast, was among the first casualties, as were trade unionists Harry Thuku, and Makhan Singh, and publisher and freedom veteran Gakaara wa Wanjau.

Prison and detention, therefore, are forms of exile, and the growing body of literature in this genre confirms that the human spirit, even in the most dehumanizing of circumstances, can never cease to be creative.

There are two consequences of such confinement, the most immediate being that the people are deprived of figure-heads who serve as their inspiration, and eventually lose morale and give up; for the leaders, the experience of separation from the people denies them what one of Africa's leading authors, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, calls "the everyday."

He should know. In 1977, Ngugi was detained without trial for one year. In 1982, Ngugi undertook what he thought was a month-long tour of London to promote his two new books, *Devil on the Cross* and his prison memoir, *Detained*, both written on toilet paper at the Kamiti Maximum Prison.

Ngugi's brief trip to London would extend to 22 years in exile, after receiving a coded message that hinted at his impending arrest upon return. Part of his exile has been spent in England and the United States, which is his present base.

This is not to suggest, however, that American writers have found their land hospitable, a paradox that James Baldwin explained succinctly: "Any writer," he says, "feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent – which attitude certainly has a great deal to support it."

Baldwin's first flight out of America was in 1948 when he headed to Paris, the city that his mentor, Richard Wright, called "the city of refuge." Wright preceded Baldwin there, and lived there until his death in 1960.

Baldwin recognized, as the Jamaican reggae singer Bob Marley sings in that sardonic song called *Running Away*, that one cannot run away from oneself. Although Baldwin was physically absent from the United States, he followed the events in his homeland, which were veering dangerously towards the precipice as the black-white struggles in the South hit fever pitch.

In 1957, Baldwin would return and join the roiling swirls of masses demonstrating to desegregate the South, much in same style as Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, who had taken up a gun and headed to the frontline in the Biafran secessionist war of 1960.

Okigbo would not survive; Baldwin would live to tell his story of defeat, after returning to the "city of refuge" two years later. "I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem," he would write in 1959. "I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or even merely a Negro writer."

Baldwin was raising an important question that still plagues humanity to date: the question of identity and belonging. His sojourns abroad had confirmed to him that America, with all its deformities, was the only place he would ever belong. The finality of that verdict was horrifying and, in 1970, he concluded: "To save myself, I finally had to leave for good..." And so it came to pass that at the time of his death in 1987, James Baldwin was still living in the "city of refuge."

But Baldwin happened to be in the right place at the right time, although he possibly never realized it. His city of birth, New York, also gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; Paris, the city that gave him refuge, would deliver Negritude; both were intellectual experimentations of an African Diasporic identity.

The Harlem experience triggered a sudden burst of interest in African-American artistic and cultural production. Most of the writing from this period decried displacement from Africa and contemplated the artistes' relationship with the land of their forebears.

What is Africa to me?  
 Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
 Jungle star or jungle track,  
 Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
 Women from whose loins I sprang  
 When the birds of Eden sang?  
 One three centuries removed  
 From the scenes his fathers loved  
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree

What is Africa to me?

Countee Cullen’s poem, “Heritage,” published in 1925, explores a question that Barack Obama, the American presidential candidate with Kenyan roots, has to face in 2007. How can Americans who claim African descent, Americans whose forebears were forced into exile under arms, reconnect with their forsaken land?

Langston Hughes, one of the great poets to emerge from the Harlem experience, appears to contemplate this complex heritage in “Afro-American Fragment,” which was first published in 1959:

Subdued and time-lost  
 Are the drums — and yet  
 Through some vast mist of race  
 There comes this song  
 I do not understand,  
 This song of atavistic land,  
 Of bitter yearnings lost  
 Without a place—  
 So long,  
 So far away  
 Is Africa’s  
 Dark face.

Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican nationalist and publisher, appeared to have a permanent solution to this dicey question of identity and belonging: the only emancipation possible for Africa’s Diaspora, Garvey said, would be a physical return to Africa. Garvey’s *Black Star Line*, the shipping company he hoped to use to ferry all the sons and daughters of Africa back to their homeland, floundered before he set sail, frustrating what appeared a practical if problematic endeavor.

But there were some exceptions, such as the hundreds of Jamaicans who settled in Shashamane, near the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, and the return of individuals like the great African-American thinker W.E.B. Du Bois who, in the sunset of his life, migrated to Ghana and took up Ghanaian citizenship.

Du Bois was at the centre of the intellectual movement, Negritude, which forged a collective identity for the African Diaspora by drawing from the African continent’s glorious past as a source of pride and joy. The future Senegalese president Leopold Sedar Sengor was part of this initiative, as were Richard Wright and Leon Gontran-Damas, among others.

These intellectual and cultural stirrings, from Harlem to Paris, had one thing in common: they were spurred by a historical and political consciousness, which have merged into what the South African President Thabo Mbeki calls the African Renaissance.

Mbeki's memorable speech, "I Am an African," delivered in 1994, appeared to acknowledge his country's complicated historical heritage, but also situated his unmistakable identity as an African, drawing from the wells of history to find strength to endure the challenges of the day.

How then can narratives of the African struggles be conveyed to the world in this new dispensation? How can Africa draw from the taproot of its culture and convey this triumphant tale to the world?

These stories have to be told in African languages, and South Africa has led the way by endorsing 11 local languages for official use, restoring the legitimacy of these languages and cultures after centuries of subjugation and oppression.

To use Mbeki's words, "we must assume that the Roman, Pliny the Elder, was familiar with the Latin saying, 'Ex Africa semper aliquid novi!' which means, 'something new always comes out of Africa.'"