

We Won't Budge: An African Exile in the World

a book review

by

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Manthia Diawara, *We Won't Budge: An African Exile in the World*. New York: Basic Civitas Books. 2003. 271 pp.

One of my favorite film scenes is in *Salif Keita: citoyen ambassadeur* in which Salif Keita, the Mansa of Mali, sits serenely with a youth teaching him a primary song of the Keita clan. The scene speaks to the importance of passing on tradition to the future generations in African culture. It is a beautiful and joyful scene; yet there is an unspoken sadness of the hardships which the albino Mansa has made through his own personal cultural journey to achieve this peaceful state. As Keita plucks the strong, proud, and haunting melody (Sina), my mind travels over the book that I have just finished. Music is integral to the book (all kinds of music, Rock and Roll, R & B, Soul, Reggae, but most notably the Mansas music). The author, Manthia Diawara, titled his book after a protest song of Keita, the energetic and hard hitting tune, "Ne Pas Bouger" ("We Will Not Budge").

As a Ph.D. student and a burgeoning professor of Pan-African Studies I am indebted to my colleague, Wendy Wilson, for recommending this book to me. The text provides invaluable thought on what it means to be a citizen in the modern world. Along with the work of multiple scholars including, but not limited to, Janet Helms, bell hooks, Arjun Appadurai, Mahmood Madmani, Noam Chomsky and Pierre Bourdieu, Diawara's book characterizes both the inability to escape paralysis and the possible opportunities for praxis in the twenty first century.

Essentially an autobiographical essay, *We Won't Budge* tells the story of Manthia Diawara in the United States, France and Mali. Told through the mind's eye of malaria-stricken dreams with a soundtrack of Marvin Gaye, Led Zeppelin, Rod Stewart, Roberta Flack and Salif Keita, Diawara's book weaves a complex thread of personal stories with current historical events. The work illuminates what it means to be a scholar of African descent in Africa, France and the United States.

The narrative is complicated since Diawara always seems to mold his cultural identity and politics to the audience he perceives. This is made very clear in two of his interactions: one with his nephew (a college student), and the other with a doctor (treating his malaria) in France. In the first instance he is amazed at his nephew's seeming complicity to racism in France, wondering why a more radical stance isn't taken. In the interaction with the doctor, he resists identification with conservative traditional views of African culture in Europe, opting instead for identification with European and American views of individualism. This is not a simple choice, as can be seen in the author's dialogues with his friends and family. Diawara confronts this issue of modernity versus traditionalism when he states that

What people want everywhere today---whether they are dressed in dashikis or three piece-suits-, whether they claim to be authentic Africans or Europeans—are the shortcuts to things that only modernity can give them. There are Africans who have better access to so-called Western culture—knowledge of the classics, French culture, and savoir faire—than do some French people. Similarly, there are French who know Africa better than do some native Africans...Because of modernity, we can have anybody's culture at every corner of the world, and anybody can lose his or her own culture to a new one anywhere in the world. (Diawara 2003: 148)

Diawara's interesting argument suggests his expedient disposition to be culturally fluid. As can be seen in the multifaceted interplay of stories and larger social interactions, it is clear why Diawara thrives on the margins of the multiple cultures he lives in. These multiple cultures are complex in their own ways and, together, epitomize the complexity which draws Arjun Appadurai and James Holston to point out, in "Cities and Citizenship" that "Such disjunctions between the form and substance of citizenship have made defining it in terms of membership in the nation-state less convincing and have thus devalued this form of association for both members and non-members alike" (Holston and Appadurai 2000: 298).

Indeed there is a blurring of the lines of what citizenship means. The constant interplay of African American, Francophone, and African cultures in Diawara's text is a prime example of the inability to pigeonhole the modern Pan-African. While the issue of citizenship maybe questioned on the level of the individual, the states' response to African immigrants (and even to non-white natives) is frighteningly similar to the imperial and colonial standard *modus operandi*. For instance, Diawara begins his book with an editorial dedicated to the memory of Amadou Diallo (titled *Homeboy Cosmopolitan*). The book is peppered with nightmarish stories of the difficulty of immigration and assimilation, most notably, of Bo, who immolates himself in front of the World Bank offices in Washington D.C.

Interestingly, Diawara's text came at a precipitous time of immigrant history and relations when, with huge marches in the United States, immigrants to the USA exerted their collective voices to point out that they will--certainly--not be removed. In France, the atmosphere has been far more volatile, erupting in revolts, most notably in 2005, in West African and Arab neighborhoods of Paris. The election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President of France is anticipated in the strong anti-immigrant sentiment in a racist French graffiti that Diawara describes. The image reads: "*sales negres, bougnouls, sales juifs, etrangers, retournez chez vous*" (Diawara 2003: 184) ("Dirty niggers, Arabs, dirty Jews, foreigners go home!")

Diawara's book speaks to me on two levels. First, the text suggests that in our pursuit of modernity, racism has the ability to destroy us all. This is clearly illustrated through my multiple personal and political musings and the struggle between modernism and traditionalism. In my experiences, modernity has many wonderful things to offer. I am sitting in my air-conditioned office, listening to a lovely reggae *riddim*, while writing this review on my laptop.

Yet, my mind flashes back to my trips to India last year. There, I was in the new mall with my cousins to get some music. In the music store I began to feel a strong sense of agoraphobia. The walls were closing in and people, thousands of people in this mall, were all shopping and getting the newest Bollywood releases, Western clothes, and the most modern electronics. Two weeks later, I was at the tomb of one of my Muslim ancestors. With my family, I felt much better and a much greater sense of peace and sanctuary. When I lived in Korea I remember them plowing down traditional burial grounds, which were thousands of years old, in the outskirts of Kwang-ju to build new apartments and shopping developments. I thought that the construction of those modern buildings was so fast, because they were started in the beginning of the year when I arrived and were nearly finished by the time I left less than 12 months later; but I wondered "how do you rebuild traditional burial grounds which are thousands of years old?" Our quest for space in modernity must be regulated to some degree. Traditional mores, values and practices will either be given protection in the modern world, or they will be extinguished; like ancient burial mounds, they cannot be so easily reconstructed.

Works Cited

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Salif Keita: citoyen ambassadeur (citizen and ambassador) [videorecording]. Jean Pierre Limosin, dir. Newton, N.J.: Shanachie. (2004)