Chapter 10

Obama, America and Africa

Today when we are here, there is a there. The work of V. G. Vassanji shows that someone living in America from Africa with South Asian roots tries to explore his identity while keeping a cultural openness. This is a mobile and hybrid world in which places are themselves, but difference can be erased or people can still be expected to be from or devoted to one place. Being here and there, with ties to a past elsewhere, can complicate matters of identity, culture and nation. Still, people have multiple identities, ways of being and writing in the world. Like Vassanji, Obama is a writer living in North America but with ties to Asia and Africa.

If there were more space, I would discuss at greater length Obama’s time in Indonesia, but he himself chose to stress his father and his African roots after being elected the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review. The politics of race in the United States would not allow him to emphasize his white side as much as he might have otherwise. Besides, it was important to stand up for African Americans who had and continue to have received a raw deal in the American dream or the fruits of the Americas. Elsewhere, I have focused on how Native Americans or the indigenous peoples of the New World have suffered after Columbus and although the present book does not emphasize this hardship, I do not wish that any of us should forget this dimension to the Americas. Obama himself includes Native Americans in his speeches. Vassanji would know that the other “Indians,” the aboriginal peoples of Canada have also suffered long and hard. Here I would like to begin with the European and Native contact in the Americas and then discuss Obama. Part of how I join them is through slavery and law.

How does writing engage in discussions of multiculturalism, cultural hybridity, belonging, and intercultural conflict in the Americas and, more
specifically, in the United States.\textsuperscript{21} The early modern and the postmodern have some important points in common about hybridity and attempts to secure the rights of indigenous peoples and those who were not Christians. Here, I discuss a tradition in literature, law, history and other accounts of a notion that European power, religion, politics, culture or race did not allow Europeans to claim the New World or Americas. Francisco de Vitoria, a Dominican of Jewish converso ancestry who studied and lectured at the University of Paris, became chair of theology at Salamanca in 1526. Vitoria questioned the right of the pope to set out donations of the lands of the New World. The peoples there had the right to their lands and rulers. Bartolomé de las Casas, Jean de Léry and Michel de Montaigne are others who called into question European cultural superiority. Natives themselves were go-betweens or mediators, like La Malinche, Squanto (Tisquantum), Pocahontas and Etienne Brulé. They raised suspicion but also the possibility of new cultures and hybrids in the Americas. The issue of slavery and civil disobedience or reform were also explored by people of European, Native and African descent. The issue of otherness—the meeting of different cultures and races (although this is an inadequate word given what we know of genetics, but is employed because of its traditional use) in the Americas provided another or an alternative point of view that came before multiculturalism and maybe there is a utopian vision or even a practice beyond intercultural and interracial friction—is the subject of this chapter. One such hope is the aspects of public and private in the writing of Barack Obama and this is the reason I concentrate on him after a brief discussion of law and rights after Columbus.

Obama, who has an audacity of hope, comes from such a tradition of being between cultures, and his attempt to recognize race in order to get beyond it is a key to future success in the United States, the Americas and the world. The last part of this chapter will place Obama in this context and provide close readings of his prefatory and introductory matter in his two books because that is where Obama himself frames his project and interprets and reinterprets his work. Among other things, Obama writes about intercultural conflict and relations globally and in the United States, but he also tries to present possibilities when cultures communicate one with the other and, despite the difficulties, when there is intercultural communication. The meeting of cultures is a key to this chapter, which will frame those intercultural ties in terms of historical, legal and autobiographical elements. Obama’s America and world could not exist in all their pain and greatness without the Columbian landfall. The lack of humane treatment and what we would call human rights for the indigenous peoples of the New World and the Africans brought there in slavery against their will began with Columbus and is part of the legacy that Obama addresses.