

The first Americans...

That is, the first Americans I ever met, when I was 12, 13 — a very long time ago. In other essays I have written about arriving in America, January 1950 for the first time. Arriving shortly before my 28th birthday. I came to this country after 10 years in the Netherlands, the first five under German occupation, the second five in an utterly destroyed country slowly building itself up; very slowly it seemed then. Before that I grew up in a small town on the island of Sumatra in what is now Indonesia. I was not born there, that is another story. It was on Sumatra that I met the first Americans. It must have been between the Depression and the second world war. I have vague memories of knowing that the rest of the world was in a deep depression, but we certainly were not. Quite the contrary it was a time of unusual riches. The rubber, coffee, tea, grown in nearby plantations, and tobacco for which our part of the island was famous, were selling well.

I don't know how much other children know about their parents, but I realized years into my adulthood how little I had understood what my parents were really like. I knew them as parents, but not as individuals with passions, perceptions, likes and dislikes. My father was a doctor. Public health we would call it now, then it was called hygiene. He had a large lab with many people, including several Indonesian doctors. I knew that my mother had two college degrees, but did not realize until years later that she must have missed what she called "culture:" concerts, libraries, museums, modern western art. She organized and ran the Art Circle, with a membership of a few dozen families I imagine. The Circle had subscriptions to a large number of expensive art magazines from England, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Scandinavian countries, and probably also America, although shipping from there took six or more weeks. At that time, in the 1930s, there were no planes, everything and everybody traveled by boat, three to four weeks between Europe and where we lived. The Art Circle saw to it that the magazines eventually circled to all subscribers. I remember helping my mother on Saturday afternoons (I had school in the morning) when all families brought their magazines to our house and we saw to it that each household got another set of two or three magazines. Of course the magazines were never current even when they arrived but at that time that made no difference.

Somehow my mother found out that performing artists from America and Europe began to travel the world. Mother was able to arrange for some of these famous artists to stop off at our little town before going on to Jakarta and from there to Australia and sometimes New Zealand. Or, perhaps, they came from Japan on their way back to Europe. She always went to the boat to meet them, telling them that of course she had arranged for accommodations in the only hotel, but we had a guest house and we would be honored to have them stay with us. There is where I met the first Americans.

I think the first was an immensely tall, broad-shouldered Paul Robeson. Does anyone even remember the name? A solid man who knew the deep truth, I thought. Guests shared dinner with us. I remember him as quiet, he did not talk much, but his voice was so resonant it rattled the glasses on the table. The second afternoon he stayed with us, on coming home from school at about two in the afternoon, I heard him singing. I almost fell off my bike. I had never heard a voice like that, so strong, so dark. I dropped my bike and ran to the little guest house. Most of the servants (they were "my second family") were sitting on the ground all around, spellbound. Some with tears in their eyes. The driver, Udin, (I thought of as "my other father") motioned to sit next to him, whispered "this man has much heart pain." Indeed, that is what it sounded like. A pain so deep it wrenched the hearts of listeners. I talked with him a few times. Once I said, You must be very famous. He looked at me from his height, and said, *Only in Europe*. But mother says you are American. *Yes, and in Europe I am famous*. I could not ask why.

It was about that time that our only radio station discovered jazz and blues. I don't think we knew the difference then. My father could have been a concert pianist; we had a "tropicalized" grand piano in the house that constantly needed to be tuned. I never liked so-called classical music but I, and every other young person I knew, fell in love with jazz. Hearing Paul Robeson sing Blues gave a whole new dimension to the scratchy sounds of the records of our radio station.

We had other people stay at our little guest house. I remember the (then) Budapest String Quartet (with time they changed people, not the name of the Quartet). The only name I remember is Tibur de Machula (sp?), the cellist. He was a lively man, easy to talk with about string instruments (I still do not like) and classical music (that I found boring). I took him on trips to the town, showing off our new swimming pool, the shops, the Sultan's palace.

And I remember a British woman whose name I cannot recall, Dame something or other. She was one of those people who singly could bring a whole group of people on stage, playing all the roles. I remember her as very British, very funny, tall and beautiful. I was allowed to attend the performance she gave in our town. Spellbinding. Today there is an American artist, Anna Deavere Smith, who does the same thing brilliantly, and another woman I saw briefly on my computer who creates different people just by a scarf and a change of accented English; extremely clever, wonderfully funny.

I think it was after Paul Robeson—but that far back dates are gone—another American artist, Marian Anderson. A very quiet woman, almost withdrawn. I remember her as a flat black woman. But again, a voice that resonated in the deepest bone marrow of everyone who heard her. I cannot remember whether she stayed with us long enough to do a performance; sometimes there was only a few days, less than a week, between boats. But she sang for us one early evening, my father accompanying her on the piano. He had the talent to immediately catch the rhythm and the tone of a song. Again, my second family listening in awe. She too had a dark, deep voice, with a sadness that must have gone back generations. And that enormous power. She started out softly. All blues, I remember. Most of them I knew, but had never heard a live person sing so soulfully. And as she finished one, then started another, she became more powerful. At full voice I am sure half the town must have heard her.

I did not ask her whether she was famous; my mother had told me that was not a good question to ask our guests. But my parents never explained to me what Americans felt (and some still feel) about "people of color." Living in and growing up where everybody is a different skin color, from the kind of white that goes with red hair, to black with kinky black hair, any kind of racial prejudice is silly, unthinkable. I was used to seeing Sikhs who never cut their hair, wear an elaborate turban and sometimes make a knot in their beards; very dark people from South Asia who wore almost no clothes; women wrapped in tight sarongs and a transparent white blouse. Tall men, short but super muscled men, women with hair to their behinds, and women with boyish cut short hair. Differences were fascinating, interesting. But unquestionably all fellow humans. It never occurred to me that different could be less.

That is perhaps why I was so deeply shocked when I came to America, fifteen, sixteen years later. Shortly after I arrived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to get a PhD in social psychology at the University of Michigan, I met a dentist and his family. He drove a huge Cadillac which impressed me, and had two beautiful daughters, which impressed me more. Then I heard that they had an auto accident and that the dentist and one of his daughters had to be taken in separate ambulances to hospital. They had to go to three hospitals before the last one would admit them. The dentist and his family were black. 1950, Michigan, USA. I still have not recovered from that shock. It is still one of the things about the country that is now my country that I cannot understand.

Now, sixty-one years later we have a (half)black president, and I hear comments from people I know who tell me his blackness is still "an issue." This president grew up in Indonesia and in Hawai'i, where he went to a very expensive private school. His skin color would not have been noticed either in Indonesia or Hawai'i. As Barry Obama it is quite possible that his school mates in Punahou School thought him Japanese (because of his last name), in any case mixed something-something. But everybody in Hawai'i is mixed something-something. In Hawai'i, kids in school proudly proclaim they are Iranian/Protestant/Russian/Chinese and Irish. Or Japanese/Korean/Spanish/ white. Or Samoan/Hawaiian/Greek Orthodox/Italian. Or Jewish/French/Mennonite/Dutch/American, as my children are. Here we call it "nationality," not race, and include religion but never skin color.

But in America the president's skin color is an issue...

No, his skin is not an issue. He may be half black, but his white half is president. Where is

the soul of a Paul Robeson, the deep heart of Marian Anderson. I cannot imagine Paul Robeson, with all his fame forgetting people to rescue banks. Where to find the acknowledgment that this is a new century, a new world. More and more people everywhere are mixed racially, religiously, culturally. More and more people speak more than one language. More and more people marry people from another country, culture, religion. Millions are living in countries other than where they were born. Humankind, as all Nature, is getting thoroughly mixed. One of these years America will be as mixed as Hawai'i already is, a country without a majority "race." In Hawai'i whites are a minority, as every other distinction is a minority. Getting more mixed every year. I can no longer count the "nationalities" in my own family,

Americans think they are the richest, the most powerful, the most democratic, the most everything country in the world. Yes, the U.S. is the most powerful in terms of arms, weapons, guns, planes: it spends more on planning and making wars than all the rest of the world together. I cannot believe we are the richest any more. Nor are we the most educated, the most innovative, the most all the other things. In the twentieth century much of the rest of the world looked up to America. In this century that is no longer true. They don't trust us. We have done too many lawless, cruel, aggressive acts in too many parts of the world. We pride ourselves on being a nation of law, but our laws are flawed, and far from international law. We call ourselves democratic, but that has come to mean that the richest most powerful international corporations have more voice than We the People have. When we elected a (half)black president the whole world found a new hope that America would wake up to a more real reality. But the reality of today's America is Big Oil, Big Banks, Big Pharma, Big Chemical, Big everything, and a president has not much power any more, certainly not with an opposition party whose single loudly expressed goal has been and continues to be *getting rid of this president*.

The real first Americans, Native Americans, I have only read about. I have met Hawaiian elders who had that same almost regal, deep-down grandness I saw in the first Americans I met, Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson, whom I met when I was in my early teens. They were more than life-size, they had a magnificence I do not see today. I miss that.

I know, and have known, a few other now famous people, but they are just like everyone else, except that their names are known to half the world. None of them have what I saw in the first Americans I met.

One man who appears in two of my books, and a man and a woman in the second of those two books, have that grand-ness — and they are all a shade of black. They appeared in my imagination but I am convinced there are such people in the world today. There must be. It's just that I don't know them, not even on the internet. In the evening, when I watch documentaries on my computer, every now and then I see a face that I can connect to that special quality. The beautiful, lined face of an African woman dancing. The smile on a man from perhaps India, or Malaysia, that says he has that depth and strength. The determined look of a naked little boy in one of the many slum towns that tells me he has the possibility... Yes, I too hope. Humankind has 6.92 billion faces, all of them human. I know that some of them—a few of them—have that deep soul strength that may lift all of us to another level, back to where we began: *one humankind* originating in Africa.

robert wolff. 16 may 2011

PS, only now do I realize how unlikely it seems that an ordinary teenager in a faraway little town could have seen, heard, talked a few words with, eat dinner with, such world famous people. At the time the world population is estimated at maybe two billion people. Today there are more than three times as many of us. Much less chance of meeting famous people. But it's true, I've been very lucky.