

Dr. Feelgood

TEXTES DE RÉFÉRENCE

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“Are you all right, Dad?” “Dad, dad, wake up! The doctor is here!” I hear the voice of a man leaning over me, and shaking my shoulder to wake me up. It is my son. At 15, he is already grown into a man.

“Dad, you’re soaking wet. Are you all right? The doctor is here,” he says, looking concerned.

“What time is it? You didn’t go to school today?” I ask in my turn.

“I was waiting ‘till the doctor gets here. It’s 10 o’clock,” my son replies. “When I woke up and you were still sleeping, I got worried. At first, I thought that you were tired from your trip. But you were having an argument with somebody in your sleep, and you were sweating like mad. You told me last night that you had malaria. So I got really scared because I thought that you were dying. I ran downstairs to tell the landlady. It was she who called the doctor.”

I get out of bed to meet the doctor, a Monsieur Lejeune, in the living room. He is a medium sized Frenchman, five feet six, wearing a light blue shirt with no tie, and a blue blazer jacket. Mild mannered, with the demeanor of a cultivated man, he is at first interested in knowing more about me, instead of giving me a shot against my malaria.

“Where do you come from in Mali, Monsieur Diawara?” he asks me.

“Bamako,” I say, wishing to put an end to the conversation.

“But where is your village? I mean, the Diawaras, aren’t they from Kingui, in the province of Nioro?”

“Yes, but I am from Bamako. As a matter of fact, I grew up in Guinea before returning to Bamako for high school, “ I reply in the hope of changing the subject while trying my best not to show my dislike for people who think that they know more about me than I know about myself.

“Justement, Monsieur Diawara,” he rejoins, “I know that your people, the Soninke, like to travel. But they always remain very attached to their origins. I know, because I spent two years in Mali, for my military service, and I am still very close to the Malian immigrants here, in Paris. I have many patients among them. I love Malian culture: the music and the food in the foyers. It’s delicious.”

“That’s their downfall,” I say, unable to control myself.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“I said that their culture is their downfall.”

“What do you mean by that; I don’t understand.” he says, looking at me with kind, but surprised eyes.

“I mean that Africans should take on less of their cultures here, and assimilate more of the French culture that will help them to get ahead.”

“I do not agree with you, Monsieur Diawara,” he says. “On the contrary, I think that people should hold on to their cultures. Take the French culture, for example. I wouldn’t want to lose it for some opportunistic reasons. I think that

everybody needs his culture; and Africans too need their cultures. That's what makes the world beautiful."

My head is pounding. I am cold and my body is shaking. I am really making an effort to give coherent answers to the doctor's questions without my teeth chattering against each other. I look around me to make sure that the doctor was real and not part of my hallucinations and that I am really sitting in the living room with my son standing over by his door and watching me and the doctor sitting on a chair in front of me with his black bag resting near him. I wonder when he is going to open the bag and give me something for my malaria.

"Daman, you can go to school now. I'll be okay." I say to my son. But really I had wanted to hear my own voice, to make sure that my mind was not playing a trick on me.

"Are you sure, Dad?" my son says, reluctantly going to his room to pick up his bag.

"Yeah, I don't want you to miss school."

The doctor is observing us, as if we had come from Mars. After my son closes the front door behind him, Monsieur Lejeune says, "Why do you speak English to him?"

"Because he is an American," I reply.

"But you are from Mali. Why don't you talk to him in Soninke or Bambara or even French?"

"Oh, it would have been too complicated to teach him those languages by myself. But now that he is old enough, he can learn them if he wants," I conclude.

The doctor finally approaches me and starts feeling my neck and looking inside my ears and mouth. He takes my temperature, asks me to lie down, and begins to press my stomach with his fingers.

“C’est dommage!” he says, “because children learn languages more easily.”

“I know,” I agree with him, “I grew up speaking several languages myself.” I really don’t want to get into an argument with him.

The doctor puts his tools back in the black bag, and pulls out a note pad to write down a prescription. He concurs that I have malaria and that it will go away quickly after I take the Savarrine pills that he prescribes for me. He says that my malaria is not a serious type. According to him, most of the people from my region in Mali are chronically infected with the malaria virus, which can trigger the disease when the weather changes or when the patient is fatigued.

“What do you do in America, Monsieur Diawara?” he asks me.

“I teach. I am a professor at a university in New York.”

“What do you teach?”

“I teach literature and film.”

“What type of literature?”

“I specialize in the novel and narratology. But I teach mostly African and African American literature and culture.”

“Madame Gerjbine told me that you are here with your son on leave for one year. I do not mean to meddle in your business, but may I ask what you’re doing here?”

Madame Gerjbine is my landlady. She knows everyone, and everyone knows her in the quartier Vavin. I am glad to have the opportunity to tell the doctor what I do in America, myself.

“Not at all,” I respond, “I am on a sabbatical leave from my university to do research on African immigrants in France. I am also involved in other projects with Professor Pierre Bourdieu at the College de France.”

“What is the nature of your research on immigration, if may I ask?”

“Well, let’s say that I am interested in people’s cultures, and how their attachment to their cultures contribute to their marginalization in developed societies; or how dominant societies use cultural difference as a reason to discriminate against others.”

“As for me, “ Monsieur Lejeune interrupts me, “I was one of the protesters in front of the Eglise St. Bernard. While the intellectuals were wasting time debating on television, I went and marched against the treatment of the *sans papiers* in our country. I find it intolerable the way our government treats African immigrants in this country. I am ashamed of my government’s policy toward foreigners; it is racist. Do you understand me?”

“Well, I am not just talking about St. Bernard,” I answer. “In fact, I believe that the way the issue was covered in the media—Malian illegal immigrants take over a church, and are demanding permanent resident permits—provided the government with an excuse to make immigration a security issue, and therefore to politicize it all over Europe. My research focuses on how African immigrants live in France, and how they are treated here, which may lead to such dramatic situations and confrontation between the police and the *sans papiers* as we have seen at St. Bernard.”

“What do you mean?” asks Monsieur Lejeune, as if taken aback by my answer.

“Well, first of all, let me tell you that I know Malians who are here legally, and who were embarrassed by the behavior of the *Sans papiers* at St. Bernard. They gave the impression that all Malians are lawbreakers, and that they had no pride in their country. The way the *sans papiers* clung to France and refused to be sent back to home showed how ashamed they were of their origins. St. Bernard was also an embarrassment to the French intellectuals who deny that there is racism in France. They wished that their government was more gentle in its treatment of foreigners in front of a worldwide press. Just as the Malians with permanent resident permits did not want to be confused with *sans papiers*, the French intellectuals did not want to be associated with the racism of Le Pen’s National Front, and the human rights violation of the French government. Both sides felt exposed through the media coverage of the clash between a mounting racism in France and so-called lawbreakers from Africa. But I believe that, instead of focusing on Jean Marie Le Pen and his National Front as that which is wrong with France, we should look at the cultural symptoms which give rise to fascist sentiments in France.”

“Meaning?” he asks me.

“My research shows that France is doing a poor job in assimilating its African immigrants.”

“I don’t understand you, “ the doctor says. “Do you mean to say that you still subscribe to those old ideas of assimilation developed by Leopold Sedar Senghor?”

“Let’s say that I believe in testing the strength of the Republique in welcoming every individual who feels oppressed by a monarchy, a dictatorship, or object poverty in his own country.”

“But, Monsieur Diawara, let’s put clichés aside for a moment. Don’t you believe that assimilation into French culture robs Africans of their culture, their identity; I mean, of their very difference?”

“That is exactly my point, “ I say, now feeling challenged to rise above my malaria. I have deliberately provoked the doctor into denouncing assimilation so that I can defend it. “Why erect walls between Africans and French people in the name of culture and difference? It is clear to me that Malians who do not succeed here are in the condition they are in less because they are culturally deprived and more because they lack access to the resources that the Republique makes available to other people in France.”

“Tell me, Monsieur Diawara, what do you mean by this abstract term: Republique? I don’t see your point.”

“The French Revolution laid the groundwork for universal human rights and the emancipation of the individual from the Church and the tribe,” I enjoy, looking at him straight in the eyes. “It is therefore a contradiction for French people, who believe in individual rights, to treat Africans as a community with a singular culture that cannot be integrated into the larger France.”

“Let me tell you something, Monsieur Diawara, it is clear that you have a romantic view of the Republique. I do not agree with everything that the French Revolution did. Look at the Brétons and the Corsicans who are now demanding their cultural rights. I believe that the imposition of a universal French culture was far too violent here and in the colonies. And we are now paying the price for the rise of religious fundamentalism in Algeria and terrorism in Corsica.

I am not sure either that it was a good thing to have imposed individualism on society. I would rather live under the Church than the violence and rampant consumerism that everywhere seems to be adopting from America. You see, for me, the United States is the logical conclusion of the French Revolution that you are preaching here. I don't want us to get there. When I look at the future of France I see America, and that represents a nightmare for me."

"I also see America as the future of Europe and Africa," I say. "Particularly when I look at immigration and the emergence of ghettos here. But I am not as pessimistic as you are. Yes, modernity is bad, and yes, modernity is violent, but modernity is also good and unavoidable. That's what Africans and French people here have to understand beyond and above their attachment to cultural differences and customs. It's only after we have all entered modernity, after we all have modernity in common, that we can begin to combat the evil within. I do not want Africans to be excluded from that in the name of tradition. As for the French, I believe that retreating from the promises of the Revolution is conservative and backward. It must also be that they are afraid of including Africans in the redefinition of the new France."

"Excuse my language, Monsieur Diawara, but I do think that you are being too abstract. If you come with me to the *foyer* where there are real working class people from Mali, you will see that they do not care about the Republic or the Revolution. For them, what matters is a good paycheck, so they can send money home to support their families. For those people, caring for their families at home is

more important than eating in restaurants and drinking in bars to prove that they are individuals. That's reality for me, and I don't care about the rest."

"Surely, Doctor, you're not telling me that French people are afraid of modern Africans who eat in restaurants and drink in bars?" I am now feeling that I have him, and he is going to pay for all the pain I have suffered from French racism and my malaria.

"I am not racist, Monsieur Diawara. I don't care if a person is black, yellow, or red. For me a person is a person, and that's all. What I am trying to tell you is that it serves no purpose to force people to conform to a culture that is not theirs. That's against nature; you cannot change overnight things that were done over the course of a thousand years. I love my French culture, and I would not want to give it up to become American, simply because doctors make more money there."

"You have a point there, Monsieur Lejeune," I concede, "but you are in a different position than the Africans who come here. You are educated; you are a doctor; and you have the choice to practice your profession in a modern and competitive country like France. That, for me, constitutes a positive attribute of the Republique, and it has less to do with the uniqueness of French culture than with the desire of men and women to democratize education for the masses. Surely, Africans who come here, to escape poverty in their own countries, should not be encouraged in their belief that they are so radically different from the French that modernity and the emancipation of the individual from the community are bad for them."

“It’s you who’s being conservative now,” the Doctor says triumphantly. “You want everything to conform to your République. I am telling you that man needs his culture, his God, and the foundational myths that support them. That’s true everywhere, whether you are in America, France, or Africa. But, listen, Monsieur Diawara, I must leave you. I have other patients to see. It was really nice meeting you. We must have dinner one day, when you are feeling better. My wife. Aminata who is from Mali, would be delighted to meet you. Maybe we can cook a *Mafé* or a *Yassa* and have you over. Meanwhile, give me the money for my visit and prescription, and I’ll have somebody at the pharmacy deliver your medication. And don’t worry; the worst is over. You’ll get better once you start taking the medication.”

Monsieur Lejeune, leaves me thinking about his last statement, that “man needs his culture and God everywhere.” Certainly, if I had known that he was married to a Malian woman, I would have stated things somewhat differently. I like to provoke French people to see where they stand on immigration. If they support assimilation, I defend communitarianism to see their reaction. It was good that neither one of us wanted to back away from his beliefs. We showed each other the limits of our respective positions. For him, we should let Africans live their cultures in France, even if such cultures go against our modern notions of human rights and the rights of individuals. What makes us better people, for him, is our ability to tolerate difference in others. We all have our cultures, and bad people are those that cannot stand difference. That’s why Monsieur Lejeune

protested at the St. Bernard Church; that's also the reason why he sees Le Pen and the National Front as aberrations French culture instead of the conservative norm which has always been opposed to the idea of the Revolution and the République.

I, on the other hand, may have overstated my case against Africans who hide behind their cultures in France. But the point I was trying to make to Monsieur Lejeune is that tolerance by itself is not enough. People have to be willing to lose something, in every cultural encounter with the other, in order to have a real cultural coexistence. The notion of loss as a prerequisite for any inter-cultural understanding is important, because it helps us to see beyond such notions as tolerance, difference, recognition and sameness.

My theory, after living for decades in a multicultural society like America, is that recognition and tolerance of the other, while necessary, are not sufficient in and of themselves. For most people, recognizing the other simply means admitting his right to exist with a degree of autonomy within the same nation state, or separately. For some, it is also a narcissistic way of seeing oneself in the other, and therefore denying him an existence. Finally, recognition may signify being for the other: that is, you are what the other represents you as; you exist for the other. In practical terms, this can lead to a self-interested recognition of the other as irreconcilably different from one self: I know that you exist as other, with a different civilization and culture than mine. My culture is Western, and yours is African; I am modern and you are my other, and that is the fundamental difference between us.

In the United States, identity politics relies on this form of recognition. Black people believe that their blackness is unique; white people think that whiteness is normative; and the others follow with the Asian American identity, the gay identity, and the women's identity. What identity politics does for these different groups is to allow them the right to be recognized as one of the legitimate communities within the nations; and simultaneously to naturalize their cultural difference from the others. This is what my nephew, Komakan, had in mind when he criticized the quota system in America. When the politics of recognition is forced to find a common ground between different communities, it can only do so in a narcissistic manner: my community is the most deserving; my community the model holds the key to American authenticity, national identity, good manners, and citizenship.

Whereas before I felt compelled to defend the caricature of identity politics by Komakan, now I have to defend universal values and cultural hybridity against stable and absolutist identities to Monsieur Lejeune. The notion that you can leave one culture and walk into another without contaminating it, or being contaminated by it, is no longer possible. Cultures are no longer that different from each other; they have lost to each other, and they have gained from each. Whereas at a surface level there are differences that are marked by color and physical characteristics—which are still capable of activating prejudice—at a deeper level, the desire for modernity has considerably reduced the differences between people. What people want everywhere today—whether they are dressed in Dashikis or three-piece

suits, whether they claim to be authentic Africans or Europeans—is the short cut to things that only modernity can provide them with. There are Africans who have better access to so-called Western culture—knowledge of the classics, French culture and *savoir faire*—than some French people. It goes without saying that there are French people who know Africa better than some native Africans. Furthermore, the fact is that what we call African culture—the vernacular, the religion, the music, the dance, and food—has been appropriated by world cultures. Africans, too, have made their own what the world cultures have to offer. In the process, Africa has lost some of its cultures, and gained some new ones. The same can be said about everywhere in the world today. Because of modernity, we can have anybody's culture at every corner of the world, and anybody can lose his culture to a new one at anyplace in the world.

This brings us to African immigrants in Paris. By insisting on their inalienable identity and culture, they forget the reason they have come to Paris in the first place—which is to make quick money to build modern houses at home and to buy new things that they will take home with them. By choosing to remain unconscious of this process of loss of one culture and the gain of another, they maintain a fantasy of difference between themselves and French people. They insist on their sons and daughters learning their cultures in France in order to hold a patriarchal authority over them. In the name of customary law, they maintain patriarchal practices such as female excision and polygamy. French people, meanwhile, seize upon this fantasy of difference in order to exclude them from French society. A simple understanding

the theory of gain and loss can help them to realize how France and Africa have contaminated each other. The question then will be how to organize new alliance to redefine the meaning of the République. For, after all, we all lose when the world gets smaller, and we all gain when we get together; and that is the next step for identity politics.

Doctor Lejeune, and his defense of African culture in France also reminds me of a poem I wrote a long time ago called “The Stranger,” which I have since lost. It was about a tall black man who walked toward his destination dragging a big suitcase and his left foot with it. The stranger startled the people whom he stopped to ask for directions. Some people shut their doors when they saw him coming, and others let their dogs loose to chase him away. The police suspected him of theft, and the immigration officer scrutinized his papers at every stop sign to make sure he entered the country legally. The stranger had a proud frown on his face. He seemed tired of all this hostility and lack of hospitality on the part of the people of the host country.

As I remember that poem now, I am a little embarrassed at how autobiographical and full of self-pity it was. I was crudely describing my experience as a young student in Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia in the early seventies. I was angry then at how inadequate white people made me feel in public spaces like restaurants, receptions, movie theaters, and buses. I was also frustrated by the fact that they only saw me as a black man, a potential criminal, incapable of refinement, and bred without a religion. I was invisible to them, and I hated them for that. The suitcase the stranger dragged behind him in the poem was the symbol of the cul-

ture he carried with him from his country, which no one wanted to see in America.

Even though I never went back to that poem again—I hid it somewhere deep in my suitcase, and eventually lost it as time went by and I had moved from apartment to apartment—it was clear that writing it was a necessary step in my Americanization. It made me realize that America was a society divided between black and white, and that if I were to fit in, I had to choose one side, its culture, habitus, and prejudice against the other. My dilemma was particularly shared by many African students who were forced to take sides daily between the two societies — on the bus, in the school cafeteria, on the campus lawn, and even in the classroom. When an African student sat with whites in the cafeteria, it meant that he thought he was better than black Americans, whom he considered criminals and pathological. If the same student were to sit with blacks in the back on the bus, he would get a schooling not only on how racist and oppressive American society was toward black people, but also on how superior black culture was to white culture.

Living in the black community of Washington, D.C., I became comfortable with being a black man, instead of a “man *tout court*,” and I saw white men as “white men” instead of “men *tout court*. In fact, my access to black culture—which was primarily invented in America to oppose white supremacist culture—opened my eyes to oppression everywhere, including black people’s oppression of other people.

I knew, though, that my choice of camp in America had the potential of making a racist out of me. Not a day passed

without my black friends and I mentioning “white people this. . .” or “white people that. . .” I was concerned about the lack of racial harmony between black and white in America, and I was aware of the risk of losing my individuality in the conflict between black and white.

I am not saying that it is this kind of cultural ghetto that Doctor Lejeune and his likes are preparing for Africans in France. But if I am going back to my long-lost poem again, it is because I have seen the limits of both the American and the French systems of integration. The French contempt for even that which is positive about the communitarian system in America—group recognition, empowerment and affirmative action—and their criminalization of the immigrant at the same time align them, ironically, with the most conservative and racist lawmakers in America. Paris is driving me crazy with its racism. Once again I am being made to feel constantly bad in my skin—and this time, by the country that first established the principles of universal human rights; the country that blacks used to run for to escape racism in America; and finally, the country known for the abolition of slavery and the creation of the *Société des amis des noirs*. Now, I yearn for America when I am in France, just as I used to miss France whenever I was confronted with American racism.

As Doctor Lejeune leaves, I think about these months I have spent in Paris. The French people I meet who know that I am originally from Mali are always surprised that I have chosen to live in America instead of France. Surely I must have been aware of the facts of racism in America, and as a citizen of a Francophone country, how could I have

stood to live there? They always look at me with a mixture of pity and impatience. Pity, because of all that I must have been suffering in a country that considered black people as less than men. They would then invoke a litany of human rights violations by America against black people: racial profiling by the police, the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the lynching of a black man in Texas, the death penalty in general, and the Mumia Abu-Jamal case in particular. How could I live in a country like that? Was money more important to me than the freedom to move around and to be an individual? How about all the poor and suffering black people around me?

As seen with the doctor, that is where French people also seem to lose their patience with me. The fact that I am in Paris for one whole year, living in an expensive neighborhood, must mean that I am rich. People I have ran into labeled me “*Yankee*,” “*l’Américain*,” or “*le cowboy*.” Once I offered to pay the bill for a group of friends with whom I was having lunch. One of them resisted timidly, but another said, “*Laisse-le, il est arrivé!*” (Let it go, he has arrived). In a word, I am a *nouveau-riche*, which is another way of expressing the illegitimacy of my money and my opinion.

It is clear to French people that I have not only betrayed them by moving to America, but have also bought into American racism, and only see the world in black and white. To live in America is to betray France, because the two countries have two diametrically-opposed systems: one is for human rights and the universal brotherhood of man, and the other is for the separation of the races. I run into this caricature of America everywhere I go in Paris, from the

Collège de France to the cafés and salons. As seen in my reaction to Doctor Lejeune, and my nephew, Komakan, it has put me on the defensive more than once.

I am not one to deny the existence of racism in America in order to justify why I chose to live there. In fact, I put aside any argument I might have had in defense of America's greater openness to immigrants in order to contradict French people's image of their country as a place which is hospitable to black people. As if taking revenge on them, I reserve my comments for incidents of racism in France that are as humiliating as any in America.

Even before globalization has become a catch-phrase for describing everything French people did not like, Africans were feeling the weight of racism in France. It is true that one has to be aware of the historical and cultural specificity of both America and France before comparing them *ad hominem*. As Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant have pointed out, the American racial situation and model are different from those that obtain elsewhere. After so many months in Paris, however, what strikes me most is a strange feeling of *déjà vu*. Every encounter with a CRS policeman, an immigration officer, a racist cabdriver or café waiter, a patronizing French intellectual at a reception or a dinner sends me back to my poem "The Stranger."

My own hypothesis about globalization is that French people have conveniently used it to excuse racism in their society. It is true that because of the stringent requirements of the European Union (the Schengen Treaty, for example), French immigration laws have been amended several times. But clearly, such changes have also been internally-driven,

with French people blaming African immigrants for their failure to assimilate into French culture. Globalization has enabled the French to live out two contradictory fantasies. First, they are able to maintain a heroic image in the world by protesting against America, the market economy, and the cheap homogenization of world cultures; and second, they have found a reason to discriminate against North Africans and Black Africans. They say that globalization causes mass immigration from South to North and creates a cultural disorder against which the French have had the obligation to protect themselves.

One often hears that French people do not say what they mean, and say what they do not mean. They say that they do not like the American system in which the market dictates everything and where there is neither culture nor respect for human rights. But what the French want most today is to be like Americans. They measure everything in their own society by comparing it with its American counterpart. One cannot turn on the television or open a newspaper in France without hearing or seeing "*les Américains ceci, les Américains celà*" (Americans this, Americans that). The French emulation of the American way is not only limited to the restructuring of the economy (Euro-Disney, McDonald's, the Internet) and the media, but also finds its shape in the forms of French racism that have emerged since the mid-1970s, when the so-called Pasqua Law on immigration emerged. The only difference is that while there is a general resistance to the so-called "McDonaldization" of French society, there is only a general denial of the existence of racism in France.

I will tell one last anecdote to illustrate my point about this kind of hypocrisy. I once made a *faux-pas* on the telephone by revealing my race to a French woman whose apartment I was hoping to rent for the summer. A white American colleague who had rented from her had given me her number. The apartment was situated near Palais-Royal in the first *arrondissement* of Paris. Knowing how exclusive that neighborhood was, I did not want to surprise the landlady by showing up without her knowing that I was a black man, not just a professor like my American colleague.

I was drawing upon my experiences with racial relations in America and proceeding on the fact that for the French, I was not an American all the way: I was coming back to France as an African disguised as an American. So I told her, “*Madame, je ne veux pas vous réserver de surprise. Je vous dis tout de suite que je suis un homme noir d’Afrique*” (To avoid any surprise, I wanted you to know that I am a black man from Africa). She did not miss a beat, as her answer seemed to have come automatically from the other end of the line: “*Monsieur, la couleur de la peau n’a aucune importance pour moi. Un homme est un homme, qu’importe son origine*” (For me, the color of one’s skin has no meaning. We’re all human beings). She had left me a bit embarrassed by my behavior. But a few weeks later, she called me back to inform me that her son and his family were coming back to Paris. She was deeply sorry that the apartment was no longer available.

The whole incident reminded me of “Telephone Conversation,” a poem written by Wole Soyinka in the 1960s whose narrator was also an African looking for an apart-

ment, albeit in London. It is not that French people are color-blind; it is just that they believe in a philosophy of assimilation into their culture, which they call universal, and they do not think of Africans as capable of such an integration.