

*Africa and the Caribbean*  
*Recrossing the Atlantic*

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**An Encounter in Africa**

The topic of this essay – Caribbean writers' engagement with Africa – can best be introduced by recalling an event that took place in East Africa in 1971 and 1975. This is when Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite and George Lamming, two of the most prominent Caribbean writers, made individual visits to the University of Nairobi as guests of the Department of Literature, then headed by the novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Although the visits of the two writers were separated by almost four years (Brathwaite was in Nairobi in 1971 and Lamming came in 1975), they took place at a time when Caribbean writers were rediscovering Africa, and African writers and intellectuals were discovering the Caribbean. The two Barbadians had, of course, travelled or lived in Africa before. After graduating from Cambridge in 1954, Brathwaite had worked as an education officer in Ghana for eight years and had travelled through West Africa in the early 1960s. Lamming had undertaken an extensive tour of Ghana and Nigeria in 1958, and his record of the 'African presence' that he encountered in both countries constitutes an important part of *The Pleasures of Exile* published in 1960. In a sense, the journey to Nairobi was not characterized by the kind of nervousness of the Caribbean visitor's homecoming to Africa described memorably in E. R. Braithwaite's *A Kind of Homecoming* (1962) and Lamming's *Pleasures of Exile*.<sup>1</sup> Still, the repeat African journey of the two Barbadians represented a different kind of engagement with the continent, especially in relation to their writing careers.

For Lamming, this second trip to Africa was a return to a place that had both informed and haunted his later novels; for Brathwaite, this second coming was a form of baptism, a rebirth as it were. In fact, it was during this visit to Kenya that Brathwaite, then Edward, was given the name Kamau (the one who returns) by Ngũgĩ's mother. More significantly,

unlike the earlier sojourns that were defined by both the desires and anxieties associated with late colonialism and the violence of decolonization, the trips Lamming and Brathwaite were making to Kenya in the 1970s were taking place in a significantly changed context. The 1970s was the peak of the radical cultural assertion that had followed decolonization and its discontents – the age of the Black Power movement, and the quest for a black aesthetic. Moreover, Lamming and Brathwaite were returning to a cultural landscape that had been heavily inflected by a Caribbean radicalism associated with the historical work of the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney, then teaching at the University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania. Rodney's book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), together with Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), were the bibles of the radicals on the East African university campuses.

In fact, Lamming and Brathwaite arrived in Kenya in the middle of a cultural revolution. In 1968, a few years before the Caribbean writers' arrival, Ngũgĩ and two of his colleagues at the University of Nairobi, Henry Owuor Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, had issued a manifesto calling for the abolition of the English Department. The manifesto, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', which is now considered to be one of the inaugural documents of postcolonial studies, set out to question 'the basic assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west' was 'the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage' and the attitude that Africa itself was 'an extension of the west'.<sup>2</sup>

Against the assumption that the study of literature in an African university was to be organized around the English tradition, the manifesto wondered why the continuity of tradition could not be organized around African literature: 'Why can't African literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relation to it?' (146). The manifesto then went on to propose how varieties of African literary expression, such as oral literature, could be located at the centre of literary studies. But the manifesto went even further, proposing that in addition to opening up for a space for European-language literatures and American literature, a decolonized curriculum could 'embrace', among other subjects, Caribbean literature:

The Caribbean novel and poetry: the Caribbean involvement with Africa can never be over-emphasized. A lot of writers from the West Indies have often had Africa in mind. Their works have had a big impact on the African renaissance – in politics and literature. The poetry of Negritude indeed cannot be understood without studying its Caribbean roots. (148)

By the time Lamming and Brathwaite arrived in Nairobi, the manifesto had become the blueprint for the teaching of literature both at the University of Nairobi and in Kenyan high schools; it would soon spread its wings to other universities in Africa, and, ultimately, the University of the West Indies.

If, in retrospect, the African writers' engagement with the Caribbean seems belated, it is because an African presence had been part of Caribbean literary expression for a much longer time. As early as 1962, G. R. Coulthard, then a senior lecturer in Spanish at the University of the West Indies, had signalled the significance of the theme of Africa in Caribbean writing as 'one of the most widely handled by Caribbean poets, particularly in Haiti and the French and British West Indies; not of African civilisations or African cultural values, but of Africa itself as a vague geographical region, and the imaginary and emotional fatherland of all the Negroes in the world'.<sup>3</sup> Three years later, O. R. Dathorne, a Guyanese literary scholar teaching at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, opened his article, 'The Theme of Africa in West Indian Literature', with a bold affirmation: 'No study of African literature can be complete without some reference to West Indian literature and what it has to say about Africa and Africans.'<sup>4</sup> And in his now seminal essay, 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature', first presented as a lecture at the University of the West Indies Cave Hill campus in Barbados, Brathwaite provided compelling archival evidence to show that 'African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, creatively adapted itself to its new environment. Caribbean culture was therefore not "pure" African, but an adaptation carried out mainly in terms of African tradition.'<sup>5</sup>

By the 1960s and 1970s, then, both African and Caribbean writers assumed that their literary projects could not be complete without their real or imagined relation to each other as part of what Alison Donnell has aptly called 'an affective co-belonging'.<sup>6</sup> This assertion of co-belonging was, however, an expression of both an anxiety and a wish-fulfilment. The anxiety was that in spite of the networks and associations developed by African and Caribbean writers and intellectuals since the end of the nineteenth century, the two regions functioned as different cultural sectors within the same colonial formation. The African-Caribbean political and cultural relationship had been defined by claims to a racial solidarity induced by colonial anxieties and the desire to overcome them. In this context, several questions need to be addressed: what exactly was the nature of this Caribbean engagement with Africa? Indeed, what was the Africa that had attracted the Caribbean imagination and what form had it

taken over the long twentieth century? Was the relationship between Caribbean and African writers purely at the individual level, a result of the institutions that had produced them as cultured colonial subjects – the colonial school and mission, the BBC, and the university – or was it part of a larger subterranean complex enabled by the survival of certain elements of African culture in the Caribbean? Rethinking the African-Caribbean literary relationship demands a balancing of both the anxieties generated by different historical conditions and the desire, by writers and intellectuals, to imagine a diaspora defined by cultural affinity.

### **Black Internationalism**

If the history of Caribbean literature has been difficult to write on account of the genuine multiplicity of the region in terms of its cultures, histories, languages, and diasporas, it could also be said that the period covered by this volume (the 1920s–1970s) represents the great age of black internationalism. The motivations behind this unprecedented interaction between writers and intellectuals from Africa and the African diaspora have been the subject of important books by Brent Edwards, Michelle Stephens, Ifeoma Nwankwo, Alison Donnell, and Raphael Dalleo, which have provided an essential context and background for Atlantic crossings in over half a century of literary and cultural production.<sup>7</sup>

Of these motivations, four need to be underscored: the first motivation was the need to develop racial solidarity in the face of shared oppression. For if the period between the two world wars has come to be recognized as one of the most difficult in world history – economic depression and the rise of fascism being the strongest indicators of what appeared to be the collapse of the project of modernity – it can also be said that the era was particularly harsh for people of African descent living under colonial bondage in Africa and the Caribbean and racial tyranny in the United States. Confronting the problem of the colour line – described by W. E. B. Du Bois as the great problem of the twentieth century – black intellectuals set out to resist what appeared to be imminent deracination by inscribing their oppression as singular and global.<sup>8</sup> From Du Bois' idea of the Negro's mind reaching out to the world, black internationalism was driven by 'the possibility of an alliance of intellectuals of African descent that might "shadow" and speak against the creeping domination of European imperialism around the world'.<sup>9</sup>

The pan-Africanist movement, which held important conferences in major European cities between 1900 and 1945, was the obvious vehicle for

expressing racial solidarity; it was at such conferences that intellectuals of African descent encountered one another. Moreover, pan-Africanism thrived in moments of colonial events that seemed to threaten people of African descent even when such events were distant. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was one such event, becoming a rallying point for writers across the different zones of the African diaspora. During this period, poets and activists like Una Marson used their verse to rally support for Ethiopia's fragile independence:

I wept for you  
As you two gallant sons  
Went forth  
From the brightness  
Of an English summer  
To die  
On the mountain heights  
Of Ethiopia.

I saw the tears  
In your bright eyes  
As you stood  
Side by side  
As ever you had stood –  
I felt the swell of your throat  
As bravely smiling  
You bade farewell.  
Forth you.<sup>10</sup>

Pan-Africanism was not merely a political movement; it also had an aesthetic dimension. Pan-Africanist writers and intellectuals often privileged works of art as essential conduits to black being, a 'non-alienated mode of being' at odds with the oppressive state.<sup>11</sup> In his essay, 'The Conservation of Races' (1897), for example, Du Bois argued that black Americans, as the 'advance guard of the Negro people', were 'stored with wonderful possibilities of culture'.<sup>12</sup> And reflecting on the emergence of West Indian literature in the 1930s, C. L. R. James would notoriously note that his outlook was shaped by the 'atmosphere of the literature of Western Europe': 'In my youth we lived according to the tenets of Matthew Arnold; we spread sweetness and light, and we studied the best that there was in literature in order to transmit it to the people.'<sup>13</sup> Hidden deep in the political texts of blackness was a powerful poetics that sought to imagine an alternative, decolonized future; and confronted with the constant question of whether they belonged, pan-Africanist intellectuals would turn to speech acts to assert their presence:

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song-soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Alternatively, the turn to a valorization of speech acts sought to imagine a utopia in which 'Ethiopia', representing the 'best qualities of character' and of continental 'inter-communications', heralded a new, decolonized polity:

When that eventuality happens, and Ethiopia will have entered upon her universal spiritual mission, then, hoary with age, and freed from the trammels of so-called world progress, aims, and ambitions, she shall pursue her onward path to God in the way of humble service to mankind; and, so, the saying of the seer shall become true that 'A little child shall lead them.'<sup>15</sup>

In this context, the end of empire would unleash 'the creative capacity of the African people': 'The African faces a long and difficult road and he will need guidance. But he will tread it fast because he will walk upright.'<sup>16</sup>

Now, a major complaint directed at the literature that came out of the pan-Africanist movements was that the Africa imagined by people from the African diaspora was 'a vague general concept', and that the theme of Africa, 'unspecified and without locality', became 'in many writers either the conglomeration or the collision of attitudes'.<sup>17</sup> My contention, however, is that Africa worked best when it functioned as an abstraction, an indeterminate place where alternative worlds could be imagined or new world cultural anxieties could be rehearsed without the burden of referentiality. As the following example from Claude McKay's poem, 'Africa', illustrates, myth and romance could be used to imagine a future outside the authorized narrative of European civilization:

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth light,  
 The sciences were sucklings at thy breast;  
 When all the world was young in pregnant night  
 Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.  
 Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize,  
 New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!<sup>18</sup>

Still, this craving for an Africa that could be associated with the civilizing impulse points to the double paradox of cross-Atlantic relations before independence: the first paradox is that colonialism – and colonial

institutions – were the enabling condition of transnational blackness. The great poets and advocates of Negritude – Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor – were products of the French colonial education system, passing through the *École Louis Le Grand* and *École Normale Supérieure* on their way to inventing the venture which was ‘intended to bring together the common ground of blackness’.<sup>19</sup> The second paradox is that the quintessential poetry and poetics of black movements such as Negritude emerged as part of a generalized black revolt against the idea of Europe, a place they were intimate with, but had found wanting, rather than an engagement with the lived condition of blackness. Underlying the poetics of Negritude, then, was not just the poets’ desire to recover the ontology of blackness, but also to separate themselves from what they assumed was a compromised European epistemology.

Senghor would hence come to define Negritude as simultaneously ‘a refusal and a commitment’ – a negation of what had been defined as a universal civilization and a repositioning of a ‘black-African civilization’, which ‘was a certain, non-European manner, of thinking the world and of being the world, of conceiving and of living life: a certain way of eating and working, of laughing and crying, of dancing and singing, of painting and sculpting’.<sup>20</sup> Negation was, of course, the central trope in Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Journal of a Return to the Native Land*, 1939):

Au bout du petit matin ces pays sans stèle, ces chemins sans mémoire, ces vents sans tablette.

Qu’importe?

Nous dirions. Chanterions. Hurlerions.

Voix pleine, voix large, tu serais notre bien, notre pointe en avant.

Des mots?

Ah oui, des mots!

At the end of the wee hours this land without a stele, these paths without memory, these winds without a tablet.

So what?

We would tell. Would sing. Would howl.

Full voice, ample voice, you would be our wealth, our spear pointed

Words?

Ah yes, words!<sup>21</sup>

African-Caribbean relationships also unfolded within institutions that set out to rehabilitate blackness. One such institution was the journal *Présence Africaine*, described by Senghor as ‘the primary instrument of the Negritude movement’.<sup>22</sup> Founded by Alioune Diop in 1947, the journal

sponsored the first conference of black writers and artists in Paris in 1956 and a second one in Rome in 1959. The list of the attendees at these conferences is a clear indication of the organizers' desire both to sustain a transatlantic connection and to keep connected the political and aesthetic projects in the name of decolonization.<sup>23</sup>

### The Nervous Condition

Despite, or in spite of, such institutional connections, literary relationships between African and Caribbean writers were often mediated by the nervous condition that Jean-Paul Sartre once associated with colonialism.<sup>24</sup> Given what appeared to be their absolute acculturation, Caribbean writers, many of them drawn from the middle class, were not always sure what Africa meant to them, or how it could structure their poetics. The issue was complicated by the fact that social divisions in many Caribbean countries were defined by a colour and caste system in which those who were lighter tended to occupy the highest positions in society and the darkest were at the bottom.<sup>25</sup> These dark masses were the most likely to be associated with the kind of Africanisms that George Lamming would encounter on the continent with what he called the 'shock of familiarity'.<sup>26</sup> And where colonial aspirations meant the use of education to separate oneself from those who seemed, in their practices and beliefs, to be closest to Africa, it was not accidental that members of the Negrismo or Afro-antillanismo movement, the first group of Caribbean writers to make Africa a serious theme in their writing, were mostly white poets who did not have to worry about the burden of African memory or association. These writers (the most prominent were the Cuban Alejo Carpentier and the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos) were quicker to embrace what Coulthard has described as the 'cult of primitivism' popularized by Surrealism.<sup>27</sup>

Following the example of the Surrealists, 'Afro-antillanismo' writers embraced blackness as the counterpoint to what Palés Matos saw as the aesthetic failure of the white race:

The aesthetic sense of the white race has reached a stage of dangerous cerebralisation . . . I do not believe in a monumental art of purely cerebral representation: I only believe in an art which identifies itself with the thing and fuses with the essence of the thing. An art which is as little art as possible, that is, where the aptitude for creation is subjected to the urge of the blood and instinct, which is always the right urge, because it carries with it the thousands of years of experience of the species.<sup>28</sup>



Even when it appeared to be ‘an object of dreams and fantasies’, Africa would, nevertheless, function as an important resource for black poets in the Hispanic world seeking to produce ‘a militant literature of protest against discrimination’.<sup>29</sup> For Nicolás Guillén, one of the few black poets in the Afro-Cuban movement, the assertion of Africanism was a poetic protest against its repression in the dominant Cuban culture. So, while it is true that Surrealism made blackness fashionable, it is also the case that for most of the 1920s and 1930s, Africa became a central theme in Caribbean literature during moments of doubt and crisis such the United States occupation of Haiti (1915–34).<sup>30</sup>

But, then, one could argue that Africa was not being introduced through what Dathorne described as ‘the back door and via two second-hand intermediaries’; that the African presence had always been there, a refrain, a fragment and sound, in Caribbean folk culture, an important resource for poets seeking a point of origin.<sup>31</sup> As the opening verse from Guillén’s ‘Canto Negro’ illustrates, an African sound could be deployed, even as nonsense or noise, to denote a presence where it was denied:

¡Yambambó, yambambé!  
Repica el congo solongo,  
repica el negro bien negro;  
congo solongo del Songo  
baila yambó sobre un pie.<sup>32</sup>

¡Yambambó, yambambé!  
The congo solongo is ringing,  
the black man, the real black man is ringing,  
congo solongo from the Songo  
is dancing the yambo on one foot.<sup>33</sup>

A distinctive aspect of Caribbean culture was the survival of Africanisms, which served as a powerful resource for writers and intellectuals interested in the use of folk materials. Inevitably, a Caribbean literature committed to the lives of peasants could not escape this Africanist presence, itself part of what Maureen Warner-Lewis has described as a process ‘of cultural contact and cultural engineering’.<sup>34</sup> We see this process at work in novels by Jacques Roumain (*Gouverneurs de la rosée* / *Masters of the Dew*) first published in 1944 and translated by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook in 1947, and by René Depestre (*Un arc-en-ciel pour l’Occident chrétien* / *Rainbow for the Christian West*) published in 1967, where Haitian Vodou plays a crucial role in the imagination of an alternative community.

With the independence of Ghana in 1957, the cultural space that defined African-Caribbean cultural relationships entered a new phase. While the old literary sites of African-Caribbean cultural encounter in Paris and London remained strong, it was not unusual for aspiring Caribbean artists (Kamau Brathwaite, Neville Dawes, Denis Williams, and Maryse Condé are some prominent examples) to go to Africa to become writers. The encounter with a real, rather than imagined Africa, would inevitably force these writers to confront what Brathwaite called 'a kind of discomfiting realism'.<sup>35</sup> This realism would lead to the tension between the Caribbean desire for a kind of homecoming and the realities of a continent undergoing the process of radical change, the subject of Denis Williams' *Other Leopards* (1963) and Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* (1976).

Living and working on the continent enabled Caribbean writers to think about a cultural politics – and modes of literary expression – outside the boundaries established by colonial 'Englishness' or francophone 'identity'. The imagery, structure, and phonemes in Brathwaite's trilogy, *The Arrivants*, are a vivid example of how an encounter with an African culture – the Akan in this case – could authorize a prosody no longer indebted to English verse but to the phonemic language of the Atumpan drum:

*Kon kon kon kon*  
*kun kun kun kun*  
*Funtumi Akore*  
*Tweneboa Akore*  
*Tweneboa Kodia*  
*Kodia Tweneduru*

...

Funtumi Akore  
 Tweneboa Akore  
 Spirit of the Cedar  
 Spirit of the Cedar Tree  
 Tweneboa Kodia<sup>36</sup>

This encounter with Africa did not mean that old anxieties about the continent as a homeland had dissipated or that Caribbean writers could entirely escape the burden of African history, especially the violence of decolonization taking place in Algeria, Kenya, and the Congo. Fanon identified with the nationalist movement in Algeria and became one of its most ardent advocates; but Derek Walcott, reading about the events in Kenya during the 'Mau Mau' revolt, found himself caught between what he saw as the mandate of the English language and the irruption of colonial history:

... how choose  
 Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
 Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
 How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
 How can I turn from Africa and live?<sup>37</sup>

Césaire's 1966 play, *Une saison au Congo*, was intended to dramatize the last days of the Congolese nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba, in order to probe the nature and meaning of postcolonial tragedy, while V. S. Reid's *The Leopard* (1958), a novel set in Kenya during the Mau Mau Rebellion, was intended to draw an analogy between this African event and the Morant Bay Rebellion dramatized in *New Day* (1949), his first novel.

### The Reverse Crossing

How did this relationship look from the African side? To answer this question, we need to recall that within pan-Africanist circles in the first half of the twentieth century, it was taken for granted that the African diaspora was the bearer of an 'Anglo-Saxon' culture or civilization.<sup>38</sup> At Liberia College, where Alexander Crummell and Edward Wilmot Blyden were professors of European culture and civilization, the goal of education was not the recuperation of African 'tribal' cultures, but the cultivation of Western civilization. The idea of culture and civilization was also a central concern of creoles on the West African coast, many of them descendants of returned former slaves. In their centres in Freetown and Lagos, these returnees adopted the mantle of a black cultural vanguard without apology.<sup>39</sup>

With the development of radical cultural movements after World War II, however, a transformation took place in pan-African thinking as the narrative of decolonization came to be seen as essentially one driven by the negation of Europe and its values, leading, of course, to the Black Power movements of the 1960s. At this juncture, the intellectual vanguards – the 'New World' blacks and African creoles – came to be associated with a colonial mentality. This was the view expressed by the Ghanaian philosopher W. E. Abraham, a close associate of Kwame Nkrumah:

The West Indies, where the acculturation into Europe has gone very far, will by contrast find very little to pose against the European cultures now or at independence. The West Indies are Western and might do well to accelerate the process of westernisation as the only really practical alternative given to them.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, however, African writers and intellectuals were looking to the Caribbean for institutional models, admiring the journals and literary movements that were flourishing in the region during this period. Ngũgĩ's creative writing and criticism reflect this African engagement with the Caribbean and warrant some reflection.

It is common knowledge that Ngũgĩ was radicalized by his encounter with *The Wretched of the Earth* when he was a graduate student at Leeds University in the mid-1960s; what is less known is that his reading and rereading of Caribbean literature in general, and Lamming's work in particular, was an important part of this radicalization. Caribbean literature was the topic of Ngũgĩ's uncompleted MA thesis at Leeds University. In this thesis, parts of which were published as essays in *Homecoming*, Ngũgĩ provided a systematic rereading of Caribbean literature, reflecting on the emergency of what he described as 'the most literary outbursts in the world today', locating it in the colonial situation, identifying the dialectic of race and class in the works of leading novelists, and completing two chapters on Lamming.<sup>41</sup> Ngũgĩ's work was perhaps the first materialist criticism of Caribbean literature, and the publication of these essays effectively made Caribbean literature an important subject of study in African universities and schools.

However, the question of Lamming's influence on Ngũgĩ's creative writing is more vexed: was this an early or later influence? With regard to how he became a writer, Ngũgĩ has been consistent in his claim that Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) was the inspiration for *Weep Not, Child*, his first novel, published in 1964. He has described Lamming's *Castle* as 'the first novel that painted a picture of myself in Africa - it spoke to me so directly'.<sup>42</sup> But this is a claim that needs to be interrogated closely, for while there is no doubt that Ngũgĩ had discovered Lamming's novel as an undergraduate at Makerere University College in the early 1960s, the nature of the influence was not clear: what, apart from a shared colonial experience, did Barbados (nicknamed 'little England' because of what was seen as its total acculturation into Englishness) and Kenya (one of the most violent settler colonies) have in common?

What Lamming's novel gave Ngũgĩ was not an experience, but a structure of representation, a model of how to write a bildungsroman about a colonial situation defined by entrapment rather than possibilities. Ngũgĩ has described the lesson he received from reading Lamming's novel in memorable terms:

He evoked through a child's growing awareness a tremendous picture of the awakening social consciousness of a small village. He evoked, for me, an unforgettable picture of a peasant revolt in a white-dominated world. And suddenly I knew that a novel could be made to speak to me, could, with a compelling urgency, touch chords deep down in me. His world was not as strange to me as that of Fielding, Defoe, Smollett, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, D. H. Lawrence. That was in 1961.<sup>43</sup>

But the real influence was to come later and lay elsewhere.

Consider this: at the time when he was doing research on Caribbean literature for his University of Leeds MA thesis, Ngũgĩ was writing *A Grain of Wheat*, considered by many to be his best novel. What might have been forgotten, however, is that what made this novel to be hailed as a masterpiece, its mastery of the English tradition of the novel and its astute combination of modernism and realism, had brought Ngũgĩ to a point of crisis, forcing him to confront a question that he had hitherto avoided: was it possible to produce an anticolonial fiction – one that could carry ‘the content of our people’s anti-imperialist struggles’ – in the English language and, if so, what form would this kind of writing take?<sup>44</sup>

Struggling with these questions, Ngũgĩ found it increasingly difficult to produce new fiction; it took him almost ten years to write *Petals of Blood* (1977), a novel which in its treatment of the anti-imperialist theme in the tradition of ‘socialist realism’ owes an unspoken debt to Lamming’s works. It is in this novel, rather than in *Weep Not, Child*, that Ngũgĩ would dramatize the entry of the ‘masses’ into history and celebrate ‘a people making history’, as he put it in a lecture celebrating Lamming’s work at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in 2003. When Ngũgĩ celebrated Lamming as a writer emerging ‘at the high noon of anti-imperialism, the forcible entry of the masses into history’, and his work as ‘simultaneously a product, a reflection, and a celebration of a people making history’, he might as well have been talking about *Petals of Blood*, the novel that enabled him to overcome the blockage of the colonial language.<sup>45</sup> *Petals of Blood* seems to almost take over from where *In the Castle of My Skin* ends. At the end of Lamming’s novel, the nationalist class, led by Slime, inherits the mantle of the plantocracy, dis inheriting the poor and betraying the peasant consciousness. In Ngũgĩ’s novel, the new ruling class enters into a strategic alliance with global capitalism, effectively destroying the peasant class. Separated in time and space, the two works still speak to each other in the name of a pan-African solidarity, across the Atlantic.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the cross-Atlantic relation between Africa and the Caribbean can be described as one defined by anxieties, which, nevertheless, informed writerly desires. From the Caribbean perspective, the induced fear of what Lamming called the ‘African thing’ is what had ‘fertilized the West Indian imagination in the writing of poetry and prose fiction’.<sup>46</sup> From an African perspective, the fear that the West Indies was thoroughly acculturated, that the region did not have a native tradition to oppose European culture, was mitigated by the fact that the Caribbean had been ‘very formative in Africa’s political and literary consciousness’.<sup>47</sup> As the Caribbean diaspora expanded into North America and Europe, producing a new crop of writers, the cross-Atlantic relationship tended to weaken in a structural sense, but Africa did not entirely disappear from the Caribbean imagination. Works such as *Zong!* (2008), M. NourbeSe Philip’s poetic lament, and *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Nalo Hopkinson’s Afrofuturist saga, are examples of how the figure of Africa, even when it was displaced in time and space, would continue to be an important ingredient of the Caribbean imagination.

## Notes

- 1 E. R. Braithwaite, *A Kind of Homecoming* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962); George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).
- 2 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o [James Ngũgĩ], Henry Owuor Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong, ‘Appendix: On the Abolition of the English Department’ in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1973), 145–150 (at 146). Subsequent references given parenthetically. I thank Thembelani Mbatha for providing invaluable bibliographic research for this essay.
- 3 G. R. Coulthard, *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 71.
- 4 O. R. Dathorne, ‘The Theme of Africa in West Indian Literature’, *Phylon*, 26/3 (1965), 255–76 (at 255).
- 5 Kamau Brathwaite, ‘The African Presence in Caribbean Literature’, *Daedalus*, 103/2, ‘Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism’ (1974), 73–109 (at 73).
- 6 Alison Donnell, ‘“The African Presence in Caribbean Literature” Revisited: Recovering the Politics of Imagined Co-Belonging 1930–2005’, *Research in African Literatures*, 46/4 (2015), 35–55 (at 39). See also Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 77–129.

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- 8 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 1903 (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3.
- 9 Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 16.
- 10 In Una Marson, *The Moth and the Star* (Kingston: Una Marson, 1937), 81–3. For an extensive discussion of Marson and Ethiopia, see Donnell, 'African Presence', 40–3.
- 11 I borrow the terms here from J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (College Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1992), 1–16. I have developed this argument in 'W. E. B. Du Bois and the Identity of Africa', *Gefame: Journal of African Studies*, 2/1 (2005), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/g/gefame/4761563.0002.1011-w-e-b-dubois-and-the-identity-of-africa?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.
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- 13 C. L. R. James, 'Discovering Literature in Trinidad: the 1950s' in James, *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), 237–44 (at 237).
- 14 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 189.
- 15 J. E. Casely Hayford, *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation*, 1911 (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2011), 215.
- 16 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 1938 (New York: Vintage, 1963), 377.
- 17 Dathorne, 'Theme of Africa', 264.
- 18 Claude McKay, 'Africa' in McKay, *Selected Poems* (New York: Bookman, 1953), 40.
- 19 A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 8.
- 20 Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Negritude and Modernity' in Robert Bernasconi (ed.), *Race* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 143–66 (at 144).

- 21 Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* in Aimé Césaire: *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 48, 49.
- 22 Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'Preface Letter' in V. Y. Mudimbe (ed.), *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness, 1947–1987* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), xi–xii (at xi).
- 23 In addition to Césaire and Senghor, prominent writers from Africa and the Caribbean attending the conference included Jacques Rabemananjara, Paul Hazoume, A. Hampate Ba, Frantz Fanon, J. Alexis, J. Price-Mars, and George Lamming.
- 24 Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface' in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 7–34 (at 20).
- 25 The classic study of colour and caste is Louis Fernando Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica*, 1st edn (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1953).
- 26 Lamming, *Pleasures of Exile*, 161.
- 27 For a discussion of primitivism in Caribbean poetry, see Coulthard, *Race and Colour*, especially Chapters 2–5. For surrealism in the Caribbean, see the essays collected in Michael Richardson (ed.), *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1996).
- 28 Quoted in Coulthard, *Race and Colour*, 30–1.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 30 For a discussion of the occupation and the politics of representation surrounding it, see Michael J. Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), Chapter 2.
- 31 Dathorne, 'Theme of Africa', 257.
- 32 Nicolás Guillén, *Sóngoro cosongo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1959), 21. For slightly different views of Africanisms in Guillén, see Roberto González Echevarría, 'Guillén as Baroque: Meaning in Motivos de Son', *Callaloo*, 31, 'Nicolás Guillén: A Special Issue' (Spring 1987), 302–17, repr. in Roberto González Echevarría, *Celestina's Brood: Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); and José Piedra, 'From Monkey Tales to Cuban Songs: On Signification', *MLN*, 100/2, 'Hispanic Issue' (1985), 361–90.
- 33 Nicolás Guillén, 'Negro Song' in Jacqueline Cockburn and Richard Stokes (ed. and trans.), *The Spanish Song Companion* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 226.
- 34 Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), xxxii.
- 35 Dathorne, 'Theme of Africa', 271.
- 36 Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 98.



- 37 Derek Walcott, 'A Far Cry from Africa' in *Collected Poems, 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 18.
- 38 See, for example, the essays collected in Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, 1844 (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1994); and Alexander Crummell, *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourses*, 1895 (Miami: Mnemosyne, 1969).
- 39 For a discussion of creoles on the West African coast, see Akintola Wyse, *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretive History* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1991); and Michael Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Lagos Life* (London: Macmillan, 1977).
- 40 W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1962), 133.
- 41 Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, 81.
- 42 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'I Don't Think We Were Meant to Come Out Alive', Interview with Maya Jaggi, *Guardian*, 28 January 2006, [www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/28/featuresreviews.guardianreview13](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/28/featuresreviews.guardianreview13).
- 43 Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, 81.
- 44 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Currey, 1986), 29.
- 45 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'The Sovereignty of the Imagination: The Writings and Thought of George Lamming', a speech given at the University of the West Indies, Mona campus, in Kingston, Jamaica, 5–7 June 2003. Repr. as 'Freeing the Imagination: George Lamming's aesthetics of decolonization', *Transition*, 100 (2009), 164–9 (at 164).
- 46 Lamming, *Pleasures of Exile*, 34.
- 47 Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, 81.