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# THE AFRICAN INSPIRATION OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The literary relations between the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude Movement have, we believe, been sufficiently documented.* It has been demonstrated that Senghor, Damas and Césaire avidly perused the pages of *Crisis*, *Opportunity* and Garvey's *Negro World*—Journals in which Langston Hughes, Claude Mckay, Countee Cullen and Jean Tommer—the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, first had their poems published. It is equally literary history now, that some of the poems of the Afro-American writers were reprinted in such Parisian Black-oriented journals and little magazines as *Les Continents, La Dépêche Africaine, Le Cri des Nègres, La Revue du Monde Noir* and *Légitime Défense*.[1] In this dissemination of ideas across the

*An earlier form of the article was presented at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in April 1985 as the Distinguished Alumni Lecture.

[1] See Mercer A. Cook, "Literary Contacts: African, West Indian, Afro-American" in *The Black Writer in Africa and the Americas*. Ed. Lloyd Brown, Los Angeles, Hennesey and Ingals, 1973, pp. 120-140; Edward O. Ako, *The Harlem Renaissance*

Atlantic, Paulette Nardal, Edward A. Jones, Louis T. Achille and Mercer Cook played the important role of literary intermediaries through their translations.[2]

If the wind of influence blew in the 1920s from Black America to Africa and the Caribbean, in the 1960s and early 1970s the impetus came from Africa to Afro-America. There have been attempts to demonstrate this. W. Ofuatey-Kodjoe does just this in his essay "The Ideological Triangle: Reciprocal Ideological Influences Among Afro-West Indians, Afro-Americans and Africans" and Robert G. Weisbord, in an excellent chapter appropriately entitled "Afro-America's Africa consciousness",[3] graphically details how Africa and things African became the vogue among Afro-Americans. However, in both of these discussions, not enough attention is paid to the impact of African Aesthetics and the Negritude Movement on the Black Arts Movement. The following remarks should therefore be regarded as, if not a chapter, at least a foot-note to the study of the reciprocal African and Afro-American literary influences.

It is first of all important to note that after the heyday of the Garvey movement of the 1920s, interest in Africa subsided and seemed to have hit an all-time low in the mid-fifties. In a poll conducted by *Ebony* magazine around this period, Africa came in last as the subject readers wanted to be informed about. Less than

*and the Negritude Movement: Literary Relations and Influences*, Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, University of Illinois, 1982; Samuel O. Assien, "The impact of the New World on Modern African Literature", *Comparative Literature Studies*, Spring 1977, pp. 74-93; Christophe Dailly, "Leon Damas et la Negro-Renaissance". Paper presented at the African Literature Association Conference, Gainesville, Florida, April 12-14, 1980; Irene Dobbs Jackson "La Négritude: morale d'un phénomène" in *Littératures Ultramarines de Langue Française: Genèse et Jeunesse*, 1971, pp. 21-31; Edward A. Jones, "Afro-French writers of the 1930's (*sic*) and the creation of the Negritude School". *CLA Journal*, 14 September 1970, pp. 18-34; Charles Larson, "African-Afro-American Literary Relations: Basic Parallels", in *Negro-Digest*, XIX, December 1969, pp. 35-42; and Ngandu Pius "Le rôle des noirs Américains dans la littérature négro-Africaine", in *Congo-Afrique* 11, 1971, pp. 337-344.

[2] A dissertation or an article still needs to be written on the role of Mercer A. Cook as a literary intermediary between the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude Movement and between the Negritude Movement and the Black Arts Movement.

[3] Robert G. Weisbord, "Afro-America's Africa Consciousness" in *Ebony Kinship: Africa, Africans and the Afro-American*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1973.

a decade later, the attitude of Afro-Americans towards Africa began to change. This change in attitude was due in part as a result of internal social situations in the American body politic and the changing African political scene.

The Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine of 1947 marked the onset of the Cold War which was punctuated by two "hot" wars—the Korean war from 1950-52 and the Vietnam war from 1964-1973. As part of the Cold War mentality, any fundamental criticism of American life, especially from a radical perspective, was regarded as treason. Consequently, there were hunts, black lists, loyalty oaths and trials of espionage. It was an age which called for conformity. The media was full of praise for the American way of life and the growing GNP; the expanding highway program, and the suburban shopping malls seemed to make of America a real showcase of democratic free enterprise and a consumer paradise made more so by the ubiquitous credit card.

However, by the mid-1960s it was realised that the presumption of a national consensus had disguised very real divisions and critical social problems. Heretofore, any criticism seemed to assume a rather homogeneous, white middle-class suburban society of more or less contented consumers who suffered, if at all, from the spiritual malaise of too much consumption. What the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal named *An American Dilemma* (1944) —the most flagrant and challenging failure of democracy, the failure of racial equality, hardly captured the public imagination. The plight of Blacks in the South and in the ghettoes of the Northern cities did not enter public consciousness as a potentially tragic rift in American society until the Civil Rights movements of the late 1950s dramatized by marches and boycotts led by the Rev. Martin Luther King.[4]

From the period of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Blacks had been seeking in vain to integrate themselves into the mainstream of the American nation, and the more they struggled, the more difficult the search became. As unemployment rose

[4] I am extremely grateful to Alan Trachtenberg for some of the ideas expressed in this and the previous paragraph. For more information see his "Intellectual Background" in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, Daniel Hoffman ed., Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 1-50.

among black youth, as slum lords sought to make the most out of their dilapidated buildings and as police brutality mounted and there seemed to be no indication that the Civil Rights Acts would be passed, black frustration increased. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) which intended to celebrate the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, had for its motto "Free by '63". All indications, however, were that there would be everything except freedom for Blacks by 1963.

The string of assassinations of black spokespersons or of persons who were perceived to be sympathetic to the demands of Blacks only seemed to confirm the fears of those who felt that they would forever be aliens in the land of their birth. Among these were John F. Kennedy (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Martin Luther King in 1967 and Robert Kennedy in 1968. To many, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the apostle of non-violence, was a clear indication of the fact that America rejected their peaceful quest for equality. In anger, many black youths took to the streets and several cities were up in flames. That they were earmarked for genocide was regarded by many Blacks as a statement of fact. If they were to survive as a people, many argued, then they would have to link up with other non-white peoples of the world.[5]

Increasingly, many began to see themselves not as people involved in a struggle for Civil Rights but rather as a group engaged in an anti-colonial struggle.[6] In this anti-colonial struggle, what was needed was Black Power to counter the White Power that had put Blacks down for so long. Integration was no longer seen as a viable goal. The appropriate option now was separation. When the Black Power Conference met in Newark, New Jersey in 1967, the

[5] William K. Tabb, *The Political Economy of the Black Ghetto*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1974, pp. 21-34. Tabb uses the internal colony model to describe the plight of black Americans as a colonized people. Like most Third World people, they have a low *pro capite* income, a high birth rate, their economy is dependent on external markets, their businesses lack capital and managerial know-how, the local businesses are owned by non-residents and the important local jobs are held by outsiders. In the case of black Americans, their main export is, of course, unskilled labour.

[6] For excellent discussions of this period see John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, New York, 1967.

participants called for two separate states, one for Blacks and the other for Whites.

The impetus and the growing impatience of Blacks was due, in part, to the partial independence of some of the African states and as a result, the growing importance of Africa on the international scene. Prior to Ghanaian independence in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah visited the United States where he received a rousing welcome in Harlem and in South Side Chicago. When Sekou Touré of Guinea also visited the United States in 1959, he, too, was given a very warm welcome. The same was true of the visit of Patrice Lumumba a year later. He endeared himself to the Howard University crowd he was addressing with words like:

> Africans built America. They are the reason America has become a great power. If Africans can achieve that in the new world, they can achieve it in their own continent.[7]

It was little wonder then that Afro-Americans were enraged when they heard of Lumumba's assassination in 1961 for it was tantamount to a lynching in Mississipi or Alabama. Many Afro-Americans seriously began redefining themselves within the American context and began reassessing their relationships to Africa and its people.

But perhaps the single most important event that caught the attention and the imagination of Afro-Americans was the Mau Mau movement in Kenya. The Kenyans, in their struggles against British imperialism, had come to the realization that only armed struggle would free them from the British colonial grip. As Afro-Americans placed their own efforts alongside those of the Kenyans, these appeared feeble and half-hearted. The freedom rides, sit-ins and marches were seen as efforts that would never bear fruit. Martin Luther King Jr.'s contention that through redemptive suffering, Blacks would eventually win over their enemies, was viewed with scepticism by many, What was needed was the example of the Kenyans—armed struggle.[8]

[7] Quoted in Weisbord, *Ebony Kinship*, p. 15.

[8] The term Mau Mau was used in the United States as a noun for the first time in *Newsweek*, November 1952, p. 44. However, it was used as a verb, to maumau (to threaten or terrorize) in *Harper's* of February 1971, p. 107. See Gerald M.

Thus, among Afro-Americans in the 1960s, the word Mau Mau was synonymous with armed struggle. In a speech in Harlem in December 1964, Malcolm X. intimated that the Mau Maus were the greatest African patriots and freedom fighters and suggested that Mau Mau was just what was needed in Alabama, in Georgia and even in New York City.[9] Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose English translation came out in 1963, strengthened the views of those who strongly felt that only through armed struggle could they redress the situation in which they found themselves. Fanon argued that it was through violence that the oppressed were kept in a position of subservience and only counter-violence could redress the imbalance. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers acknowledged their debt to Fanon when they said "the feelings and thoughts and passions that were racking us were incoherent and not connected until we read Fanon. Then many things fell together for us, harmonizing our attitude and making it possible for us to set up a political organization."[10] Also, Stokely Carmichael, one of the ideologues of the Black Power movement underscored Fanon's importance when he said "For many black people in this country Fanon is becoming one of the men from whom we are gathering a lot of our ideological strength."[11]

As black disenchantment with American society deepened, there was, to use John Henrik Clarke's phrase, a greater effort to "reclaim the lost African heritage."[12] Now, distinctions were made between "Negroes", people who were unable or unwilling to divest themselves of the old slave mentality and "Blacks" or

Dalgish, *A Dictionary of Africanisms, Contributions of Sub-Saharan Africa to the English Language*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1982.

[9] *Ebony Kinship*, p. 14.

[10] Quoted in Micheline Rice-Maximin "Frantz Fanon and Black American Ideologies in the 1960s". *Contemporary French Civilization*, Spring 1981, Vol. V, No. 3, p. 374.

[11] Stokely Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks: Black Power to Pan-Africanism*, New York, 1971, p. 36.

[12] This is the title of John Henrik Clarke's article in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, eds. Le Roi Jones and Larry Neal, New York; William Morrow & Co., 1968. Clarke ends his article with a quotation from John W. Vandercook's book *Tom-Tom*: "A race is like a man. Until it uses its own talents, takes pride in its own history, and loves its own memories, it can never fulfil itself completely", p. 18.

"Afro-Americans" who were proud of their African past and of being black. On university campuses, black culture associations and Afro clubs proliferated. Students lobbied, not always peacefully, for Africa-related courses to be added to the curricula. This was seen as an antidote to the "miseducation" of Blacks. To many, black survival was anchored to a consciousness of Africa and its culture. Many began learning Swahili and some demanded that it be taught in secondary schools.[13]

The aspiring young writers of this period, of what later became known as the Black Arts Movement, sought to emulate and to draw inspiration from others who had used their creative ability for the liberation of their people. Most naturally, they turned to Africa and to the writers of the Negritude Movement. They wanted to perform the role of the writer in a traditional African society. They were greatly aided in their quest as a result of the many books related to Africa that were published as more schools and universities instituted Black and African Studies Programs. The German popularizer of African culture was Janheinz Jahn, whose book *Muntu: the New African Culture*, saw its American edition in 1961. Its importance and circulation was assured when it was selected by *Library Journal* as the book of the year. In chapter V of his book where he discusses the nature and function of African literature and culture, he writes: "All magic is word magic, incantation and exorcism, blessing and curse. Through *Nommo*, the word, man establishes his mastery over things."[14] He further adds "According to African philosophy man has, by the force of his word, dominion over things, he can change them, make them work for him, and command them. But to command things with words is to practise "magic". And to practise word magic is to write poetry."[15]

[13] *Ebony Kinship*, p. 18. In the 1968 elections, there was a proposition to change the name of East Palo Alto, California, to Nairobi. Donald Reid who initiated the campaign argued that the lack of place names in America which are of African origin tends to perpetuate the unfounded belief that Americans—real Americans—are people of European descent and that people of African ancestry are not really Americans at all. The proposition never passed.

[14] Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture*, translated by Marjorie Greene, New York, Grove Press, Inc. 1961, p. 132. The concept of *Nommo* is similar to G. K. Galbraith's concept of the "word-fact".

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 135. For some of the ideas expressed here, I am indebted to A. James Arnold's excellent essay "La réception Afro-Américaine de Césaire: Un dialogue

Apart from Jahn's book, others were also translated and these too helped the would-be writers of the Black Arts Movement to be better acquainted with African culture and the African world-view: Aimé Césaire's *Return to my Native Land* (1968), *A Season in the Congo* (1968), *The Tragedy of King Christopher* (1969), Norman Shapiro's *Negritude: Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean* (1970), Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972) and Marie Collins' *Black Poets in French*. Ellen Conroy Kennedy's very influential anthology *The Negritude Poets: An Anthology of Translations from the French* appeared in 1975. It is significant to note that Jahn's and Césaire's books were published by Grove Press of New York. In this, it performed the same role as Editions Rieder in Paris carried out in the 1920s, as it sought to acquaint the French (African and Caribbean) reading public with the works of Afro-American writers.[16]

The young Afro-American writers then sought to transmute the knowledge they had gained to their own literary purposes. This was particularly true of the theorists of the movement. Hoyt Fuller, who served as a midwife to many of the young poets of this period, said, "... William Shakespeare... has only limited relevance to the

difficile aux Etats-Unis" in *Césaire 70*, eds. M. and M. Ngal and Martin Steins, Paris, Editions Silex, 1984, pp. 141-16. Also, Thomas A. Hale's article in the same book, "Césaire dans le monde blanc de l'Amérique du nord".

[16] For example, the French edition of Claude Mckay's very influential novel *Banjo*, was published by Rieder in 1929. One must also mention that reviews such as *African Forum*, the organ of the American Society of African culture and the *Massachussetts Review* did a lot, through critical material, to popularize African literature in the United States. For example, *African Forum* carried the following articles: Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1965, James W. Ivy "President Senghor's Negritude", pp. 139-141; Vol. 1, No. 4, Spring 1966, Leopold Sedar Senghor "The Function and Meaning of the First World Festival of Negro Arts", pp. 5-10, Langston Hughes "The Twenties: Harlem and its Negritude", pp. 11-20, Thomas Melone "New Voices of African Poetry in French", pp. 65-74, Mercer Cook "The Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor", pp. 134-136; Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 1966, Ellen Conroy Kennedy "Four African Poets", pp. 103-107; Vol. 2, No. 3, Winter 1967, Mercer Cook "President Senghor's Visit: A Tale of Five Cities", pp. 74-86, Naomi M. Garrett, "The Spiritual Leader of Negritude. Hommage à René Maran", pp. 116-119; Vol. 2, No. 4, Spring 1967, Mercer Cook "The Poetry of Léon Damas, *Névralgies* by L. G. Damas", pp. 129-132, Emile Snyder "Introduction to French Negro Literature", pp. 132-134; Thomas Cassirer "Review of Abdoulaye Sadji's *Tounka*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1965; *Le Chant du Lac* by Olympe Bhely-Quenum, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1965, pp. 134-136; Vol. 3, No. 1, Summer 1967, A. C. Brench "The Novelist's Background in French Colonial Africa", pp. 34-42.

revolutionary spirit raging in the ghetto."[17] This was in part because, as John O'Neal noted, for Blacks to find their peopleness within the context of the American nation or the values of the West, was like a chicken trying to find his chickenness in an oven. Blacks were an African people.[18] The tradition to be followed then, was spelled out by Ron Karenga who said, "Leopold Senghor tells us that all African art has at least three characteristics: that is, it is functional, collective and committing or committed. Since this is traditionally valid, it stands to reason that we should attempt to use it as the foundation for a rational construction to meet our present day needs."[19] Thus, in the preface to their anthology, *Black Arts: An Anthology of Black Literature*, Ahmed Alhamisi and Kofi Wangara write:

> These are the chants, the prayers, songs, drumbeats, of warriors
> and lovers in the spirit of Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah,
> Sekou Touré,
> are the prophets the seers
> offering you yourselves the spirits of your soul, offering you this
> truth: we are the beginning and the end.
> O mulungu (God) who lives
> we offer you these sacrificial creations
> that you may give us strength to fire our weapons
> in our armed struggle for liberation
> and finally
> peace in the heavens again salaam salaam.[20]

These writers saw themselves as engaged in a kind of literary guerrilla warfare. Woodie King notes that many of the writers of this movement saw themselves as acting out what Frantz Fanon saw as the third phase of the literature of a colonized people where the first phase is assimilationist, the second is pre-combative and the third is the fighting phase where "instead of according to the

[17] Hoyt W. Fuller "Towards a Black Aesthetic" in *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle, Jr. ed., New York, Doubleday & Co., 1971, p. 9.
[18] John O'Neal "Black Arts: Notebook", *The Black Aesthetic*, p. 47.
[19] Ron Karenga "Black Cultural Nationalism" in *The Black Aesthetic*, p. 33.
[20] Ahmed Alhamisi and Harun Kofi Wangara eds., *Black Arts: An Anthology of Black Literature*, Detroit, Black Arts Publications, 1969, p. 13. It was a common practice during this period for many Afro-Americans to use African names and to spice their language and writings with especially Swahili words and expressions.

people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, [the author] turns himself into an awakener of the people, hence comes as a fighting literature. During this period a great many men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now that they find themselves in exceptional circumstances, feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action."[21]

Thus, through the power of the word, through *nommo*, these writers wanted to destroy the world as it existed and to recreate it in their own image. This motif is implied in these verses by Imamu Amiri Baraka:

> We are black magicians, black arts
> we make in black labs of the heart.
> The fair are
> fair, and deathly
> white.
> The day will not save them
> and we own
> the night.[22]

During the period of the 1920s, apart from the fact that the works of Afro-American writers were disseminated in Paris, some of these writers themselves visited Paris and occasionally got into discussions with some of the African and Caribbean writers-to-be. This was particularly true of Claude Mckay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and their mentor Alain Locke. In the 1960s and 1970s when the wind of influence was blowing to, rather than from the United States, Césaire, Senghor and Damas also visited the United States and especially Senghor and Damas encouraged and advised the young black writers. Leopold Sedar Senghor visited the

[21] Woodie King, ed., *Black Spirits: A Festival of New Black Poets in America*, New York, Random House, 1972, p. XVII.

[22] Leroi Jones, *Home: Social Essays*, New York, William Morrow & Co., 1966, p. 252. Larry Neal, a leading theorist of the movement, indicates that Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), was the first to use the term "Black Arts" in a positive sense. The idea of the power of the word destroying the world as it is and rebuilding it in the image of black people, is also contained in Baraka's poems "Black Art" and "Black Dada Nihilismus".

United States in 1966,[23] and Césaire in 1968 while he was on his way to Martinique. But perhaps Damas played the most useful role in part because he spent the last years of his life in the United States.

Actually, Leon Damas settled in the United States in 1970 and taught in Federal City College in 1971. In 1974-75, he was Distinguished Professor of Black Literature at Howard University and was linked to this institution and to Federal City College up to his death in 1978. During his stay, he helped Ellen Conroy Kennedy with her very influential anthology *The Negritude Poets: An Anthology of Translations from the French* (1975). Most importantly, Damas served as a spiritual advisor to the young black poets of this period. Many of them acknowledged their debt to him in their memorial dedications. June Jordan termed him her "artistic and political father". To Jayne Cortez, Damas was a "brother and teacher" and to Haki Madhabuti, he was that individual who "knew everyone personally and had read and encouraged their works". Similar views were expressed by Eugene Redmond and Larry Neal.[24] As Daniel L. Racine so adroitly put it, Damas was simply endeavouring to give back to his American brothers from whom he had learned so much in the thirties.[25]

As it was then, the movement had gone full-circle. The Harlem Renaissance writers influenced those of the Negritude Movement and in turn, the Negritude writers had a great impact on those of the Black Arts Movement. Since there is a great similarity in the problems that face Africans, Afro-Americans and Afro-West Indians it is very likely that even in the years to come, they will still attempt to borrow ideas and views from each other to express their individual and collective predicaments. Langston Hughes put it very well when he said:

> We are related — you and I.
> You from the West Indies;

[23] This visit has been very well documented in Mercer Cook's article "President Senghor's visit: A tale of five cities". See note 16.

[24] See "Leon Damas, The Humanist: A Memorial Dedication", *New Directions*, Vol. 5, No. 3, July 1978, p. 113.

[25] Daniel L. Racine ed. *Léon-Gontran Damas, 1912-78: Founder of Negritude, A Memorial Casebook*, Washington, University Press of America, 1979, p. 27.

I from Ghana.
We are related — you and I.
You from the States
I from Africa.
We are brothers — you and I.[26]

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[26] Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*, New York, Vintages, 1974, pp. 265-266.