THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT
AND THE AFRICAN HERITAGE IN
A PAN-AFRICANIST PERSPECTIVE

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As stereotypes of Africa continue to overflow today’s film industry in crude and in subtle forms, following very much the fluctuations of the American and European demand for safari/Tarzan adventure, the necessity of comprehending the idea and function of Africa in the works and lives of some of the pioneers of Black pride consciousness imposes itself. The deep sociocultural reality commonly referred to as the African heritage was often despised if not simply unacknowledged throughout slavery by White mainstream culture and Black leaders seeking emancipation and integration for Blacks, as we will examine further.

The era of the Harlem Renaissance reversed some of the negative connotations attached to Africa, although we do find Black precursors of a distinctive racial art and history in the 19th century. The new Negro Movement and Pan-Africanism were the two predominant cultural forces of the Harlem Renaissance that initiated the first official rehabilitation of African and Black American cultures in the New World.

My approach presents socioliterary interpretations of the African heritage in works of that era while placing them in the broader context of Pan-Africanist studies. Interestingly, most of our ideas on the African heritage emanate from texts that do not fit within the classical landmarks of 1920 to 1930—for instance, Martin Delany’s (1879) *The Principle of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color*, W. E. B. DuBois’ (1903, 1940) *The Souls of Black Folks* and *Dusk of Dawn*, Alain Leroy Locke’s (1936) *Negro Art: Past
and Present, and Melville Herskovitz' (1941) The Myth of the Negro Past. This vast notion was not a monolithic collective belief in the 1920s. Therefore, the core of my research focuses on the ubiquity of the African heritage to which African Americans were awakening through Pan-Africanism, anthropology, and literature as well as on its function in the deconstruction of the official parameters of race and nationality.

This was the time "when Negro was in Vogue," as Langston Hughes (1940, chap. heading) mildly put it, which meant in more realistic terms that Blacks were being objectified as exotic icons. This exoticism or primitivism had considerable facets and cultural meanings, but it certainly marked an evolution from the days of minstrels and coons. Even if the general lot of Black people had not been improved, these stereotypes were merely masks to Black entertainers, who soon managed to break through the nonthreatening images of Black inferiority. Commenting on the act of legendary pantomimist and dancer Johnny Hudgins in a short film made at the Club Alabama in New York in 1926, columnist M. Jefferson (1996) wrote, "Hudgin's body and face are so fluid and witty, his charm so palpable that the burned-cork makeup, which we have come to read as intrinsically degrading, seems as incidental as the white makeup circus clowns have worn for centuries" (p. 35).

As for Africa, it still was "the dark continent" in European colonial literature and, consequently, in the White American culture of the 1920s. There was a direct correlation between the inferior status of Blacks in America and that of colonized Africans. Any term evocative of Africa was highly fashionable in Harlem's nightlife: Beale Street was known as Jungle Alley, artificial palm trees decorated the Cotton Club and enhanced the prefabricated exoticism of the stage and performances. Although the literary contributions of the Harlem Renaissance and the cultural implications of Pan-Africanism should be distinguished from the primitivist discourse, there would still be significant interferences. White patrons of the era were so conceited that they had created for Black people this exotic identity, which in dance or literature meant that their distinctive character was their sensuality or, in other words, their closeness to jungle rhythms. Ironically, and from this unique standpoint, we
observe that the African heritage was disparagingly imposed upon them.

Although set before the Harlem Renaissance, the story of the beginnings of Bert Williams and George Walker exemplifies the feelings of frustration experienced later by quite a number of Harlemites, as upper-class Whites quasi-dictated their cultural standards and expectations for Black arts. Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston would equally be victims of the system. In 1893, at the Mid-Winter Fair in San Francisco, Williams and Walker were given a chance to perform in the roles of West Africans from Dahomey. Naturally, they would just have to create their part, having never seen true Africans, and the fair-goers would not know the difference (Haskins, 1990, pp. 21-22). This demonstrates that the African heritage was, at times, a myth or a Black and White invention. Yet, talented as they were, they were able to impregnate their African-like creations with dignity despite their unawareness of their African connections.

Harlem writers understood the ambivalent role played by stereotypes, and only a careful analysis of each author can reveal their true feelings toward Black arts and the Black heritage or their degree of dependence on White patrons. As early as June 1921, Langston Hughes had his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” published in The Crisis, thanks to Du Bois’s literary editor, Jessie Fauset. Throughout the decade, he would see a variety of his poems and collections in print; most of them—“Danse Africaine,” “Negro,” “Afro-American Fragment”—echoed that nostalgia and melancholy often seen in DuBois’s autobiographical evocations of the African American heritage. There was no falsity in these poems, yet the same could not always be said of his fiction, as seen in the sensationalism of his short story “Luani of the Jungle” (Huggins, 1995, pp. 146-155). Pressed to be a primitive, he did eventually rebel against his White patron, Charlotte Mason, and her stereotypical views of Black culture:

She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as
though I did. I was only an American Negro who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa, but I was not Africa, I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. (Hughes, 1940, p. 325)

Hurston would be caught in a similar web of dependency on Mason. The main difference between Hughes and Hurston resided in Hurston’s emotional detachment vis-à-vis Mason. There is no doubt that the financial support she received from 1927 to 1932 enabled her to do what she liked above anything else: collect Black folklore. She sincerely believed in her mission. Her biographer Robert Hemenway (1977) has not only patiently reconstructed the details of all her trips but was also able to express her dilemmas and her passions in a spirit of total empathy only equaled by Alice Walker. As he writes of Hurston’s collecting techniques, one feels that he himself has applied them to his subject to be closer to her.

Hurston collected conjure lore in the same way she collected anything else, but totally immersing herself in the lives of the people who live it, by what anthropologists call the participant-observer technique. Only rarely to that time had any observer been taken into full participation in hoodoo rites. (Hemenway, 1977, p. 118)

This act was only one among many others that placed her at the heart of her Black and African heritage. She was not observing it or even philosophizing about it as Alain Locke would; she was living it. The Black South, Africa, and Harlem would so often be a stage for Hurston, as Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Wallace Thurman, and Bruce Nugent would observe in their autobiographical writings; not that she did not take the New Negro Movement seriously, but her spirit was freer than Locke’s and DuBois’s governing principles.

As for Hughes, it is interesting to note that the first phase of his career ended with his Harlem works and the demise of Mason’s patronage and of his collaboration with Hurston. But the Pan-Africanist essence of the Harlem Renaissance would continue to provide it impetus during his proletarian phase and beyond. His last work, an anthology of African writers, would be dedicated to
the young writers of Africa (Hughes, 1961). Furthermore, as we verify the ubiquity of our subject, we will come to see that it has no better home than Pan-Africanism.

By turning to Africa, many African American writers as well as a few White Africanists helped to create a positive identity for Black Americans, yet their itineraries differed greatly, and their views would often be dismissed in the long process of a people in search of their roots, which official history had attempted to suppress. As simple an expression as it seems, the African heritage was far from being identified as a quotidian social or cultural reality by the average Black northerner or migrant, nor was it a deep personal preoccupation for those in pursuit of a literary career. DuBois emerged as one of the greatest promoters of the New Negro Movement, striving to infuse it with his moral and political conceptions of art and literature. When in 1910 he made The Crisis, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a medium to promote Black achievements, he was encouraging a more self-confident Black personality. By 1915, he set Black humiliation into its international context and laid out new tactics. His purpose was definitely propagandistic in politics as in art. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson (another tenor of the Harlem Renaissance), and Locke (philosopher and theorist of the New Negro Movement) believed that the cultural high life of Harlem was an integral part of the revitalization of the Black personality that accompanied the repudiation of imperialism. If Locke never actually endorsed the Pan-Africanist credo, his writings and actions evinced his Pan-Africanist ideals in urging Negro artists to embrace the beauty of African art and to create their own distinctive racial art. Even though Locke and DuBois were not the first to establish the historical connections between Africa and America, they can largely be recognized as the first to concretize these cultural and political bridges between two cultures.

The terms African heritage, African ancestors, African dress, African heritage cuisine, African religions and worldview, and tribute, prayers, or praise to my ancestors fill the lives of and the Afrocentric cultural events of more and more African-Americans of the late 1990s. Exotic packages, including Africa’s wild
reserves, pyramids, and ancient slave-trading posts, have flour-
ished as commercial ventures. But are these individual and collec-
tive journeys the expression of a spiritual desire to relive the drama
of Africans torn away from their homeland? Quite often, once the
first days of intense cultural shock are over, the traveler may experi-
ence strong feelings of alienation or even a deep sense of irretriev-
able loss instead of that enrichment and quasi-miraculous connec-
tion promised by his travel literature. When examined closely, were
these emotions not experienced by Langston Hughes himself?
After his first exclamations, “my Africa, Motherland of the Negro
peoples! And me a Negro! Africa!” (Hughes, 1940, p. 98), this ele-
mentary stage of Pan-Africanism would be followed by his episto-
lary words to his mother describing naked children and tattered
clothes and his being mistaken for a White man. He then confided
to her, “It’s a scream!” (Hughes, 1940, p. 163).
Hughes’s state of mind and feelings somewhat enact the bitter
disappointment of 19th-century back-to-Africa emigrants, which
too few have reflected on; the findings of these “African” settlers
corresponded sharply with Bishop Henry McNeal Turner’s mos-
quito-free Africa. Their economic status and educational back-
ground had created a different sensibility and receptivity to Africa.
Such differences in perception have marked history and litera-
ture from the very beginning of these postpartum contacts with
Africa. It is so true that African elites themselves do not share a
common vision of their continent; Kwame Nkruhama’s Africa could
not be Senghor’s Africa, nor could it ever resemble Sekou Toure’s. Robert Weisborg (1973), who has perceptively analyzed
some of the richest historical manifestations of the African heri-
tage, wrote, “Blacks have never spoken with one voice about
Africa’s heritage or about their own responsibility to their ances-
tral homeland” (p. 7).
In the early days of Black pride and consciousness, taking pos-
session of the African reality often corresponded to a social and
political strategy of survival, as in the case of Bert Williams and
George Walker. After centuries of denigration by Whites and Blacks,
Africa would provide artistic motifs and economic opportunities
even before striking any emotional chord. It was the European in-
terest in African arts that pushed many artists and writers, including Locke and Aaron Douglass, in the direction of the African heritage. In many instances, Douglass revealed his doubts about the African connection; he would write,

I clearly recall (Winold Reiss) impatience as he sought to urge me beyond my doubts and fears that seemed to loom so large in the presence of the terrifying spectres moving beneath the surface of every African Masque and fetish. (as quoted in Powell, 1989, p. 45)

Therefore, in spite of Locke’s and DuBois’s injunctions to embrace the African arts and Africa’s historical grandeur, Africa was merely a stepping stone for poet Countee Cullen and for Douglass, not to mention fine artists such as Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker, who carried many “jungle” themes in their repertoire but who knew how to transcend them just like Hodgin’s Black mask. There is no doubt that they would all partake of the aura of the New Negro and Pan-Africanist philosophies without locking themselves within primitivist or African-oriented aesthetics. Hughes, after facing his own disillusions with the African continent, would create in the primitivist vein and yet remain aloof from African realities until his communist ideas would take him back to his roots through the experience of brotherhood with the exploited. His political and literary evolution certainly prove that “Africa did much more than affect his senses” (Berry, 1992, p. 38).

Thus, instead of giving African American creators of the 1920s a common style and philosophy, the “African” experience enhanced their individualistic artistic temperaments. There is, I would argue, a strong spiritual and physical connection between Black peoples’ color consciousness in the 1920s and their mixed attitudes toward Africa. A superficial interpretation of this colorism could easily reduce it to the expression of an inferiority complex reflecting the inviolability of the color line. On the other hand, it should be noted that the thematic use of skin color was favorably echoed by “Negritude” poets from Black Africa and the Caribbean, true believers in the Pan-African heritage. A source of exoticism for Europeans and White American audiences, dark shades of pigmentation
were equally stigmas, hence the ambivalence of the African heritage in the eyes of Aframericans. Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Marcus Garvey experienced alienation and rejection due to their dark skin (Watson, 1995, pp. 85-88). An extremely rich palette of formal and slang terms developed in their novels and poetry to describe shades of complexion, with the lighter shades being associated with the most positive value (material or moral). Light-skinned Blacks ranged from “high yaller,” “honey,” lemon colored,” and “pink” to “olive”; middle shades of skin color went from “cocoa brown,” “coffee-colored,” “Vaseline brown” and “chestnut” to “nut-brown”; and the darker skinned were described as “blue,” “inky dink,” “eightball,” “damn black,” “low black,” and “dark black.”

We must realize that Blackness was first made into the visible sign of the Black man and woman’s so-called inferiority before its transmutation into a social mask used for survival, parodied by White minstrel makeup and later used in its full artistic force. In effect, Black artists had no other recourse but to wear charcoal-color makeup over their Black faces as a means to make their stage entrance. At present, we possess the perspective and sociological tools to see through those masks as well as to detect any discontinuous masking at a time when conforming to White stereotypes of Blacks was the only way to survive in the artistic profession.

As their quest for their remote heritage began through the study of history, by traveling to the continent, or going down home—all had different personal itineraries—Harlemites and Pan-Africanists probed into the significance of their own darkness. Very few of them actually set foot on the African continent, because the heritage had to be redefined within the boundaries of the self if it were to radiate for others. Sometimes, it was only years later that the heritage seekers were indeed able to decipher their expedition, as Hughes himself did. Eurocentricism certainly marked Hughes’s, DuBois’s, Locke’s, and Nella Larsen’s (1994) views or depictions of Africa, but when placed in the proper social context, their efforts to recreate the African space can be analyzed separately or collectively as statements of cultural, political, and economic resistance against a growing White hegemonic power.
As we look two centuries back, the idea of possessing a homeland and everything that comes along with it, such as a group identity, cultural pride, and the right to self-government and to the exploitation of one’s land, were the essential preoccupations of all back-to-Africa Black proponents. But could the African heritage, the sum of one’s forefathers’ values, be retrieved from a dreamland or from the acquisition of a new hyphenated identity, as American-Liberians had hoped in the 19th century? And could the trauma of a people having been dispossessed ever be healed through an act of imperialistic conquest?

Even literary or political recognition would be insufficient to appease the spiritual longing for home of a people. Cullen’s (1925) question, “What is Africa to me?” (pp. 36-37), seldom raised in the 1920s and before, is startling for the complexity under its formal simplicity. Through a series of beautifully crafted stereotypes, his poem questions the existence of an African heritage per se and goes as far as establishing any belief in it; even those in the White and Black press who lauded Color (Cullen, 1925) would use Keatsian and Shakespearian comparisons to evaluate his art. Novelist Wallace Thurman (1932), who knew him well, unmasked his short-lived dedication to “the scenes his father loved, / Spicy grove, cinnamon tree” (Cullen, 1925, p. 37) in Infants of Spring. In the latter, DeWitt Clinton, a parody of Cullen, exhorts his fellow Negro artist to “go back to his pagan heritage for inspiration and to the old masters for form” (Andrews, 1994, p. 388).

Naturally, Hughes’s response to the African/pagan heritage would not be Cullen’s, and W.E.B. DuBois would offer another one. The question was not how rich their knowledge of the African past was or what cultural pride derived from it, for even the most erudite mind was bound to erect pure mental constructions to satisfy that fundamental human need to possess something of one’s own as well as to belong somewhere. DuBois would constantly travel abroad from his early 20s (to Berlin and Paris) until his death (China in the autumn of 1962 and finally Accra, where he died). Naturally, it indicates his moral and physical commitment to Pan-Africanism; but could this uprootedness not symbolize, as in Hughes’s case, that search for home? Did both suffer from the
absence of the father? Could Africa and the connection with one’s forefathers compensate that paternal separation? In other words, they were not in search of a motherland but of a fatherland.

Hurston’s fiction and her studies in cultural relativism under Frank Boas initiate a new phase in African and African American relationships. Hurston did not pursue an African dream; she incarnated that African personality celebrated by Pan-Africanism. Her Eatonville community is emblematic of the richness of Black Southern culture but even more of what DuBois (1968) calls “the subtle but real ways the communalism of the African clan can be transferred to the Negro American group” (p. 219). Moreover, her work exemplifies the notion of a cultural continuum between African modes of being and Black southern rural worldviews and shows the limitations of a belief in a static African culture located in a remote historical period impervious to change. Primitivism/exoticism had greatly contributed to popularize that belief. Hurston’s vision of the South is sustained by a proud Black communal identity, which assuredly represents the joint product of long-standing African American and African traditions. Her introduction to *Mules and Men* allows us to probe into those evolving forms of the African heritage:

As early as I could remember it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories. Even the women folks would stop and break a breath with them at times. As a child when I was sent down to Joe Clark’s store, I’d drag out my leaving as long as possible in order to hear more. (as quoted in Walker, 1979, p. 83)

But one may wonder, where is the African heritage? Undoubtedly, it resides in the fascination of this little girl for her oral traditions. Later in life, she would become the *griotte* of her people. We must remember that African traditions themselves have been undergoing changes at an accelerated pace since the irruption of colonialism. Therefore, Hurston was not trying to reproduce the specific African settings of transmission of oral cultures, however close they may seem. The difficult conditions of emergence of the African heritage can be viewed through the ideological battle
opposing the controlling mainstream culture and the ancestral forms of Afrocentrism seen in the emigrationist movements, Pan-Africanism, and the New Negro Movement.

Africanisms in African American culture have always abounded; unfortunately, centuries of racist propaganda would make any association of the African American with the African sound like an insult well into the 20th century. This was the direct result of the hegemonic historical and philosophical discourses that governed the planter, the politician, and the lawmaker and affected the Black psyche. Two distinct groups developed, with one that would painstakingly hold on to the words and music of their forefathers as DuBois (1990) did to the “heathen melody” (p. 182) of his grandfather’s grandmother. Thus, we witness the dynamics of culture when Black people are capable of weaving emotions or values of a remote past into their present lives. The other group had been cut off from their roots or had even dissociated themselves from Black life as victims of the system and out of their own ignorance. Hughes would unveil them in his manifesto:

But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour a racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible. (as quoted in Huggins, 1995, p. 305)

But the Harlem intelligentsia would still be groping to comprehend the nature of their African American identity, because it was far beyond the psychological reality of their two-ness. Cullen, mocked by Hughes, did not want to be acknowledged as a Negro poet. This fact alone illustrates some of the contradictory views about the Black man’s racial identity and even Harlem’s originality. Locke (1968) embraced too many trends in his volume The New Negro, which gave an unclear image or, at best, an eclectic one of what the African heritage truly was. In 1940, Melville Herskovitz would revise his judgment expressed in “The Negro’s Americanism” (Locke, 1968, pp. 353-360) in which the African American had first been seen as a passive recipient, as opposed to the active participant he really was in the cultural life of Harlem. The move-
ment of rehabilitation of Black people was initiated in the field of anthropology by Franz Boas, who had trained Hurston, Katherine Dunham, and Herskovitz. In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovitz (1958) countered the racist assumptions of Black and White scholars (including his early ones) who had described the Negro as a man without a past. E. Franklin Frazier was one of them: "Probably never before in history has a people been so nearly stripped of its social heritage as the Negroes who were brought to America" (Herskovitz, 1958, p. 3). The fact that these Africanisms remained unseen, unfelt, or unacknowledged for years by African American thinkers was, no doubt, due to the absorption of these men and women into the politics of race. It is only in this light that we are able to understand DuBois's (1968) contention in *Dusk to Dawn*: "Above all the Negro is poor: poor by heritage from two hundred and forty-four years of chattel slavery, by emancipation without land or capital and by seventy-five years of additional exploitation and crime peonage" (p. 181). He was engaged in many battles that frequently overlapped or generated contradictory statements, which his detractors would underscore. For example, his belief in the spiritual gifts of Black people led him into a sort of racial essentialism incompatible with the scientific methods he professed to use (Cruse, 1967, p. 41).

The majority of Black writers and thinkers of the 1920s were concerned about their visibility as human beings, as a brief analysis of Locke's (1968) *The New Negro* will show. The need for Harlem Renaissance writers to artistically reaffirm their human personalities was acute; it went beyond the question of Negroes begging for humanity, as Richard Wright had ironically put it (Huggins, 1995, p. 397). Locke's (1968) work is a poignant description of his vision of cultural pluralism in America—a pluralism that belied racial inferiority and invited racial interaction for mutual enrichment. He did not advocate separatism but simply the full participation of the American Negroes, with their distinctive culture in the building of American institutions. His cultural program was designed to run counter the effects of a racist society and force full integration into American society.
Despite their strong individualism, Hurston, Hughes, and Nella Larsen spoke for this cultural pluralism. Hughes asserted repeatedly that he, too, was American (Huggins, 1995, pp. 154-155), and Larsen’s neither Black nor White character, Helga Crane, cried out, “I am Negro too.” But the notion of cultural pluralism leads us to the question of transcendence of the African heritage. To affirm its validity in America in the 1920s constituted an extraordinary intellectual feat on the part of a number of intellectuals. In effect, the idea of Black cultural distinctiveness in the racist milieu, at the beginning of the century, had been used to justify racial segregation and even immigration restrictions on the grounds that people of African descent could never assimilate (Hutchinson, pp. 64-65). Until today, some Aframericans view the idea of an African heritage as a threat to their social and political integration in the American fabric of society. In reality, the idea of first recognizing Aframericans as complex human beings illustrated by The New Negro (Locke, 1968) anthology reinforced Franz Boas’s conclusions that different racial types were not suited to different types of civilization, consequently dismissing a typical racist argument. Cultural relativism was born. Viewed in this light, African cultures suddenly became acceptable and useful. From then on, Locke (1936) promoted African Negro art as the “historic art of the Africana homeland” (p. 93). And he made it the source of the Black American’s distinctive art tradition. Moreover, he classified African art into different artistic manifestations in accordance with ethnicity; thus, he reveals the plurality of the African heritage, which he never confuses with African American art. Once again, we must recognize the insight and depth of the artistic sensibility of the period. So far, we have seen that Black creativity in sociopolitical thought, philosophy, dance, music, graphism, fiction, and poetry voluntarily created stereotypical forms based on popular White-Black beliefs about Africa; but endowed with the gift of transcendence, these artists often reached the truth of their personal vision, owing their spirit of resilience to Africa and slavery. Although some of its inconsistencies were made apparent, The New Negro (Locke, 1968) publication provided the home that all young Harlemites needed and, in that sense, laid the foundations of an African
heritage with solid roots in a new Negro identity and in a "younger generation . . . vibrant with a new psychology" (Locke, 1968, p. 3).

Placing the phenomenon conveniently termed "the African heritage" in its defining sociological and ideological context has certainly provided some measure of the multiplicity of its manifestations, but it also grew out of the historical collisions of two radically different worlds.

In the early 19th century, representations of Africa in the Black psyche say more about the Western cultures embraced by New World African missionaries than about ill-known African societies. Black America reached back to Africa as early 1787 and well into the mid-20th century. The will to reconnect physically with her would follow the trends in race relations in America. The question was how African Americans could think of Africa as of their true home. Being more than two generations removed and of no ethnic affiliation created a cultural vulnerability that blurred their notion of heritage.

But another neglected issue that globalizes the notion of African heritage needs to be addressed: Africa was wrenched from Africans even before the Middle Passage. Unfortunately, few African indigenous texts were preserved to document the tragedy of *Arabo-Berber jihads* (Islamic holy wars in the name of Allah) or of the trans-Saharan slave trade followed closely by the Atlantic slave trade, but we certainly do possess the crude historical facts of those times and the human gift of empathy to reconstruct these events. So does this phase of history modify in any way the parameters of our subject? I strongly contend that it deepens every single moral, physical, and spiritual suffering associated with the African heritage that I have just evoked in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. All these writers and artists unconsciously expressed—in every way society allows them to—the centuries of despair of a people made to crawl in front of other men and women in the name of an ideology or a god. Therefore, Africans in Africa also had a complex role in the making of the African heritage concept. Too often we view the African heritage as the exclusive possession/creation of a single group of people. Cross-cultural studies will no doubt encourage the recognition of a vast, diverse, historical heritage common to all
peoples of African descent, because this phase of consciousness is still at its beginnings for the majority of diasporans. As the drama of racism and neocolonialism continues to unfold, resistance to hegemonic power can successfully be drawn from the act of unearthing the truth about a people’s past. African consciousness—past and present—or, in other words, the will to preserve a set of social and cultural values in the face of annihilation, constitutes the soil of a true heritage. It is undoubtedly through the works of DuBois and Locke that both Africans and African Americans have come in the 20th century to understand many of the connections between Africa and America, but we cannot dismiss proto-Pan-Africanism or the terrible impact of the slave trade on African worldviews, which have equally informed the thinking of our mentors.

An example of an early crucible of the African heritage is provided by Manikongo Nzinga Mbemba, baptized Afonso in 1491 by Portuguese missionaries. He deplored the disintegration of the political, social, and economic foundations of his kingdom through the slave trade conducted by the Portuguese, armed with a lucidity of a kind rarely acknowledged in world history books. In 1526, he addressed the King of Portugal, then John III the Pious, thus,

Sir, your highness should know how our Kingdom is being lost in so many ways that it is convenient to provide for the necessary remedy. . . . And we cannot reckon how great the damage is, since the mentioned merchants are taking every day our natives, sons of the land and the sons of our noblemen and vassals, because the thieves and men of bad conscience grab them wishing to have the things and wares of this Kingdom which they are ambitious of. (Damsel et al., 1975, p. 111)

Could we not already speak of a will to preserve a complex set of ancestral customs, a Bakongo heritage, parts of which would be annihilated less than a century later? Although my parallel with the experiences of New World Africans expands over immense stretches of land and decades, we are able to recognize collective and individual patterns of cultural and psychological resistance allied to the forces of retention contained in strong civilizations in both spheres—what I readily term the essentiality of New World
Africans. The feelings of an irretrievable past and the will to resist the forces of acculturation characterize these two segments separated in place and time, transforming the fixed image of Africa viewed from both sides of the Atlantic into dynamic spaces of resistance.

In this maze of racial, historical, and political identities, early colonizers and antebellum Black thinkers had looked to Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia for the reevaluation of the African American identity, because a myriad of European and American racist theorists had conspired from the beginning of the slave trade to put the Black race at the bottom of the human value scale (Harris, 1987, pp. 13-28). The interdependence between the themes of great African civilizations and the abilities of New World Africans was visible in every back-to-Africa movement and writing. It demonstrated the eagerness of thousands of freed men and former slaves to turn their aspirations and longings into concrete social and economic terms on the African soil.

But is it reasonable to describe their enterprises as the fulfillment of the African dream? How did these men, women, and children view their African heritage among the Krio, the Mende, or the Temne? Was the heritage not more alive while in America, and were they not simply acculturated Africans and the agents of a capitalist economy? Here lies the deep paradox of the African heritage in the 19th century and beyond; it was a conglomerate of contradictory forces and ideas about Africa. More stories of failure than of success increased the gap between reality and the imaginary. Yet, a more realistic and pragmatic understanding of the African heritage would come from Martin Delany’s (1879) cultural nationalism and DuBois’s early Pan-Africanism. This global system of thought is only one the facets of an African-centered philosophy that would emerge in the 1920s.

With the settlement of the Americo-Liberians, the civilizational values and moral qualities of their forefathers were quickly sacrificed in the name of Christianity and European savior faire. But a man such as Delany had recognized the European plot to negate the African past to justify any imperialistic intervention in Africa. Between the 1840s and 1870s, when national Black leaders led by
Douglass were urging people to resist this early Pan-African vision, Delany emerged as one of the few to hold up a bright image of Africa before his people. True enough, he had advocated the settlement of African Americans in Africa at a time when he saw no future for them before emancipation, yet he also differed from the Liberian wing of emigrationists because his program defined African Americans as an integral part within the existing African nations and not as colonizers. This stage in his mental projections illustrates a remarkable shift in the identification of the African Americans’ moral and cultural needs and of the ideal relationship with Africans. He initiated the African heritage as a dynamic process of reconciliation between the past and the present of peoples of African descent. He, therefore, stood as the spiritual and moral forerunner of DuBois’s Pan-Africanist vision as he rang the imperative for African Americans to work for racial solidarity between themselves, West Indians, and Africans in these words: “It would be duplicity longer to disguise the fact, that the great issues, sooner or later, upon which must be disputed the world’s destiny, will be a question of black and white” (as quoted in Griffith, p. 27). These thoughts were certainly prophetic of DuBois’s (1990) now too-famous lines: “The Problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” (p. 16).

More studies of Delany’s cultural Pan-Africanism and nationalism would reveal a complex web of feelings, emotions, and human aspirations underlying the spiritual links between Africa and African Americans. Most Black leaders of the 19th century preferred to ignore this reality, unconsciously influenced by racial theories or simply immersed in an ideal of American integration that severed all possible ties with African peoples described as heathens and primitives. Instead, they promoted a sophisticated Christian American Black. Only a genuine consideration of the workings and phases of evolution of the African heritage would expose the obstacles that have closed so many eyes and deafened so many ears to the teaching of Africa; even today, a well-balanced vision of the past and present of African Americans is still in the making for the
majority of diasporans. Delany was light years ahead of his time and remains so for envisioning African Americans as a distinctive people and Africa as their cultural heritage. Nevertheless, if we had to stress one fundamental point of convergence between the Martin Delanys, the Edward Blydens, the Alexander Crummels, the Henry M. Turners and our New Negro writers under the auspices of DuBois and Locke, we would say without the shadow of a doubt that these groups were engrossed in the necessity of rehabilitating Africa in the spirits and hearts of all African Americans. This project fertilized their minds and set their imagination on fire. Yet, it is noteworthy that no Harlem Renaissance writer or thinker would ever be connected to any back-to-Africa movement, however genuine their interest for Africa would be. Marcus Garvey’s African dream for the masses sets us to wonder what basis the African heritage truly possessed in pure Garveyite terms. For I truly believe that any postdevelopments of a movement, school of thought, or association entail new interpretations of the founder’s works or thought. Simply based on the back-to-Africa component, his enterprise could be described first as an economic and materialistic one: Africa was a land for Garveyites (African Americans and Caribbeans) to build their own capitalistic society and, in turn, to help Africans (more particularly, Liberians) to extract raw materials from it, which would in the next economic phase be shipped out on Garveyite steamers. This enterprise had been designed to exclude indigenous Africans; moreover, its separatist philosophy eliminated the possibility of Black integration. Harlem and Pan-African intellectuals embraced Black pride but could not renounce their mothers’ and fathers’ legacies of their struggles in America.

At the height of the imperial scramble, the persistence of Black scholars in providing evidence of the worth and qualities of Black people in any given environment was under constant trial yet proved to be essential. Works such as George Washington Williams’s (1883) History of the Negro Race in America, William T. Alexander’s (1887) History of the Colored Race in America, and Pauline Hopkin’s (1905) Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African were just a few among many others. Their striving proved instrumental in the infusion of African history in
DuBois’s mind, because his years at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin had revealed nothing but stereotypes of jungles, African savages, and cannibalism; positive African-centered antebellum literature had been adroitly covered up during Reconstruction years and Jim Crowism to maintain White cultural and political hegemony. World War I brought about two radical changes: Large numbers of Black migrants, urban workers, artisans, small traders, soldiers, and their families fought at home for their trampled civil rights; and the second was that Africa—still under colonial rule—became more than ever an emblem for human liberation because Africans had participated equally in the war. In the eyes of Pan-Africanism, Africa acquired a higher political and cultural dimension. In 1919, the efforts deployed by DuBois to convene the First Pan-African Congress were a measure of his commitment to the idea of an African foundation for his concept of race. It was also the beginning of a new era in race relations. In literature and the arts, the New Negro renaissance was launched in a competition with Pan-Africanism. In this heightened atmosphere of intellectualism, racial politics, and cosmopolitanism, the plurality of DuBois’s (1968) thinking was bound to reveal its amplitude and limitations. He never allowed himself to stop his reflection on race because he “began to conceive of the world as a continuing growth rather than a finished product” (p. 50). He would apply the same pattern of thought to Africa. After the slave trade came—the “partition, domination and exploration of Africa”—these consecutive stages of imperialism were the actions that “gradually centered [his] thought as part of [his] problem of race” (p. 51). The global dimension of his struggle for African American equality could only be achieved through his Pan-Africanism, which represented DuBois’s own African heritage.

“Africa in America” did not yield herself to series of definitions; we exposed her as a mirror of ideologies and even described her as a dreamland. Of course, we do not forget her as the cradle of mankind, which Delany, DuBois, Blyden, and a large group of Black and White Africanists had been persuaded of long before the Leakeys’ discoveries of the east African Homo habilis, erectus, and sapiens. Still, Africa’s most dynamic attributes and functions were
to be found in her capacities as the engine of Pan-Africanism. She became the link to Harlem Renaissance for Africans, West Indians, and Asians, and she rose as the voice of the movement because of her gift for languages. And just as naturally, she would become the epicenter of Black aesthetics.

At this point, we may say that there was indeed a multitude of political, historical, and even philosophical conceptions of Africa in the 1920s that had drawn their political legitimacy from early Black nationalist and Pan-Africanists, but there were also African cultural forms and worldviews prevalent in folk forms and language in small all-Black communities or in self-segregated rural ones, as in Hurston’s Eatonsville. Small shopkeepers, laborers, sharecroppers, artisans, or even entertainers developed a culture that owed much to their African roots, spirit, and wit. Theirs was an environment that contained as much good as bad but that they could claim their own. The African heritage was translated into feelings and hymns of sorrow caused not only by the severance from one’s land and clan but also from the human race and consequently from the center. The Black man and woman had to suffer geographical, social, and ethnic displacement and were, therefore, made to subsist at the periphery of life and official history. Their raison d’etre was their ultimate link with her, on which the controlling economy and society had stamped out their functional considerations. They had to find the way to her or else be nonentities. Nevertheless, they were to discover that no one could deprive them of their ancestral cultural self, which could be concealed in a name, a word, a story, or a song.

W.E.B. DuBois’s personal journey into his race was a multifarious one as only few will ever experience in their lifetime. Lost to the eye, Africa would at first live on in dismantled and scattered memories and would gradually gain strength in the collective unconscious of her descendants. The psychoreligious foundations of primary societies have been for their greatest part elucidated for us today. African societies, which had been taken apart, would have to be reconstructed through their surviving the elements not only in human numbers but equally in their religious beliefs and myths. In the midst of plantation life, work songs and later Negro spirituals
and blues rose as the first conscious forms of nostalgia for Africa. These men and women had been made to believe the way to redemption was their strict adherence to Christianity; nevertheless, Africa valiantly emerged as their true savior despite the beatings and because of them, defying the indoctrination of the slave master, of the church, and of every other controlling institution.

The African diaspora has now entered a process of transformation into the beautiful community of the living, aware of its past, present, and future potentialities. My aim was to look back at men and women who expressed an ineffable spiritual link with Africa. I do not view them as ideologists or polemicists of a new “Africa for Africans” credo, nor as the early promoters of modern Afrocentricism, which is an idea that our politicized literary minds would be quick to appropriate. We live in a myth-making epoch, and as Wole Soyinka has dramatically portrayed in A Dance of the Forests, our need to make heroes will take us dangerously away from our individual truth and from the necessity for individual salvation in a world where greed has become a global phenomenon. What I have attempted here was to describe the degree of individuality and creativity thrust in this African complex. The African heritage may have been lived as a compelling truth by Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, and Alan Locke, yet it was not erected by them as such. My intention was to demonstrate that these authors’ contextual definitions of race countered the pseudoscientific racial theories and popular beliefs about Africa of their days. However, in the process of their spiritual and cultural emancipation, they were subtly unveiling their kinship with Africans.

APPENDIX

SUGGESTED READING


**REFERENCES**


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