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COLOUR AND CULTURE
IN
LITERATURE

By Femi Ojo-Ade



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The title of my lecture, "Colour and Culture in Literature" could, indeed, be replaced by another, *an Obsession with the Obvious*. Just look around you in this hall this evening, and you will see a sea of Black faces, or shades of black, sprinkled with some other colours and hues, including—and particularly — white. Here in Nigeria, the so-called giant of Africa, that fact might seem a banality. Now, imagine the inverse, and those of us fortunate, or more appropriately put, most unfortunate, to have been trained abroad are, of course, able to imagine it because we lived the reality: imagine a lone, dark face, lost in a world of white. in this same hall. I recall that a few friends, unable to face the sheer force of white stare, victims of schizophrenia, paranoia and all sorts of phobia sequential to the stare, succumbed soon enough, and were put on the plane returning to their "savage" roots in Africa.

The language is deliberate. For those who might not know, it was created by Civilization and, like most other flavoured fares of which we shall talk later, it was taught to us ever so humanely, that is, with the whip and at gunpoint, as part of the *mission civilisatrice*. To the first image that we have just painted, let us add a second, much older, deeper, and more destructive: in an African village eons ago, men and women, early-risers and hard-workers all, were going about their business of living and surviving in a world with which they were one, when out of the blues came a white man, fully bearded, clad in a long, flowing robe white as snow. The hair on his head was blond, his eyes were blue and penetrating, his whole figure was imposing, instilling some fear, if not respect, in the minds of the nonplussed villagers (the *civilized*, we should mention here, would call them *natives*). On his left hand he had a big, black book; on his right, a crooked wand. Looking all too serious in the surrounding marked by mirth, he started to speak, as they say, in tongues, from time to time raising his wand high above his head, opening his black book and reading aloud while gesticulating rather desperately. The villagers were curious about the strange white man. Imbued with their traditional hospitality, they welcomed him. More importantly, one of them, quite imag-

native, remembered **an age-old story that a messiah would come from nowhere to save his people. It had to be the white man! Gradually, communication was established. The white messiah learned the Africans' language and chose a handful of the young ones in the community who learned his language and became his interpreters and allies.**

Soon after, he was followed by others, white like him, but more bellicose, more beastly, bellowing orders to the frightened Africans, whipping them. The first white man presented his black book, his brothers added their force. Hand in hand, they seized the land. The black villagers, cowed, coerced into submission, seized the black book and swallowed the lesson spat out of the sweet lips of the blue-eyed messiah: **'your reward is up in heaven. . . , resign yourselves to your fate here on earth; for, the Lord thy God watcheth over you and will feed you abundantly. He has prepared and reserved a place for you on his right hand and shall give you life everlasting . . .'**¹ And so the story goes: the white missionaries went through African communities preaching what they called the Word. Their brothers, the professional colonizers, followed, seizing the land. The white man, thus established in Africa, grew from strength to strength. He was to make certain concessions in his *civilizing mission*, but he remained forever sure that the mind of the black man was warped forevermore.

An obsession with the obvious. But you may ask: why? For, after all, we are now free, we are, or have been wealthy, we wield a great deal of power on our continent. . . My response is: we take too much for granted, such as **dignity, colour, valuation, culture. Our colour, we might say, is never held against us here. Our colour is our land and the land, our colour. We are in style, as they say. But, really, are we? And before we dig deeper into the depths of our despair, let us be clear about one thing: to most of us, Truth is anathema. It does not tickle our fancy. It is a terrible trauma. The second of the two images depicted above, some might say, is untrue; but only a hypocrite, or a hybrid, would thus affirm. The**

facts are there to see, poignantly etched out in books and, most especially, in the memories and minds of those whose ancestors, generations before, suffered from an inhumanism worse than colonialism, and we are talking of the slaves. The question of colour is inextricably linked to colonialism. . . and slavery. . . and culture.

Raymond Williams, the brilliant Welsh scholar, has done an excellent work addressing the subject of culture and some of the ideas expressed here are borrowed from his book, *The Long Revolution*. Culture is "the essential relation, the true interaction, between patterns learned and created in the mind and patterns communicated and made active in relationships, conventions, and institutions".² From the very beginning, from Aristotle and Plato, the subject of man and his world has always been of interest. Culture is always a state related to man, in conflict or in harmony with nature. Indeed, there was a time when culture meant more or less agriculture, the cultivation of the land and, needless to say, the notion of cultivation has never ceased to be implied in any discussion of the issue. Through the ages, evolution of the idea has taken place and emphasis has shifted from the literal and physical, to the symbolic and psychological, and vice-versa. Body and mind. The land and the intellect. Individual and society. At every level, one element has remained constant: the human being. In essence, therefore, culture cannot exist without Man and, since Man is not alone—even though certain characteristics seem to point to a return to the roots of the cave-man—his existence in society now means much. Our interest here lies in that essential relationship between man and society. A society consists of people; so, we may rightly say that the way they live is their culture; the totality of their beliefs, codes of conduct, techniques, all elements that are necessary for existence and survival in a social setting. Williams calls it "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual". Besides industrial and democratic revolutions, he discusses cultural revolution as the expansion of education

and the development of new means of communication. In other words, there are personal and social changes in today's society and how can one ever think of denying the revolution when our life-style has become so modernized that we now have visual telephone, pocket television, and wrist-watch television?

Talk of those gadgets brings to mind an important aspect of culture: arts and science are both essential aspects of culture. That fact may shock certain scientists who sit contented with the exclusivist supremacy of their profession. And I daresay that many in the humanities, forever ashamed of our inability to prove that two and two make five, squat uneasily with our inferiority complex before the mind-boggling, mechanical monsters. I do recall that, after finishing high-school, my "A" level French certificate in my pocket and while I was preparing to go in search of the golden fleece, my father asked whether I was going to become a medical doctor. I did not wish to tell him of my inability to titrate; of my diurnal dilemma when faced with dead rats in the laboratory; of my boredom with biology. I only hope that my father, who is present here today, has answered the question himself, satisfactorily.

Now, if culture is a whole way of life, it follows that, not only arts and science, but also economic considerations are of relevance. Nineteenth century Europe learned all too soon that intellectual and moral concerns could not be separated from economics. Indeed, that economic factor has come to constitute the factor determining European culture. With industrial revolution came the commercial enterprise called colonialism; while preaching the sermon to the colonized, Europe set about pilfering and profaning, pirating and prostituting, all in the name of Civilization. All the same, it is noteworthy that the act differs from the idea, that the economic factor of culture is still accepted as not being absolute. A corollary to that is that art and reality are complementary parts of the totality of life. Whether ordinary or extraordinary, art cannot be dissociated from other spheres of man's

existence. The Aesthetic Man, as Williams says, cannot be divorced from the Economic Man. Art, or creative activity, is part of the process of culture and primary to that activity, as to all existence, is communication. Communication is community. "Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change."³ Any interpretation of culture should be based upon the social whole, upon reality, upon ideas imbibed, borrowed, exchanged, modified, injected and projected.

Up to this point, our discussion has taken for granted the element of choice which is essential for the cultural continuum. However, we must not make that mistake; for, freedom has become a privilege, not a right. The reality of our life is the relegation of human rights to the back of the bus. Once that absence of freedom is considered as a factor, we immediately realize the danger and dilemma posed to us as Blacks in this universe. It need be noted that Williams's analysis of culture is patently eurocentrist and we are not blaming him for that particularity. The major usefulness of his work is that it allows us to expose Europe's hypocrisy and inhumanism. For, if culture is a whole way of life, then every community has a culture, viable, not to be vilified. And since the characteristic of a culture is to be open, permeated by fruitful, spontaneous contributions and exchange from within and without, Europe had no right to boast of a superior culture while casting aspersions on others as inferior and savage. Complementarity is the constant, not absolutism. Europe perpetrated the lie: Africa had no culture, and from then on, the path was clearly paved to the paradise of slavery, colonialism, and racism.

Africa had no culture. A land, barren of humans and populated by *animals*, needed to be humanized. The enslaver was also in need of millions of *animals* for his newfound

in the Caribbean and Americas. Thus began the trade across the Middle Passage. Portugal, Spain, England. . . , each endeavoured to save the slaves from African savagery and to offer them a culture. Of course, we all know the facts of the matter: the human cargo was to establish abroad and at home Europe's economic culture. We must never forget the plight of the slaves: scouring, hamstringing, branding, ear-clipping, burning to death, that was the order of the day, expressedly laid out in the *Code noir* of 1685, in which the great Sun King himself, Louis XIV of France, showed his concern for the slaves and his desire to make masters treat their human property with decorum. The code authorized marriage between master and any slave that bore his child, fixed food-rations per day; yet the same code authorized whipping and all forms of torture. C.L.R. James, West Indian writer, describes the slave's life thus:

The slaves recorded the whip with more certainty and regularity than they recorded their food (. . .) Whipping was interrupted in order to pass a piece of hot wood on the buttocks of the victim; salt, pepper, citron, cinders, aloes, and hot ashes were poured on the bleeding wounds. Mutilations were common, limbs, ears, and sometimes the private parts, to deprive them of the pleasures which they could indulge in without expense. Their masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, emptied the boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves. One colonist was known in moments of anger to throw himself on his slaves and stick his teeth into their flesh.⁴

Another West Indian, Aime Cesaire, calls the whole experience, *chosification*, that is, making an object out of man. A body without a mind, existing, not living. It is to the credit of the slaves that they survived. *Marronage*, the state of rebellion, was a reality. The slave was always in search of freedom and the San Domingo slaves had a Freedom Song: "We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess, let us die rather than fail to keep this vow."⁵ Survival was an assertion of life, and culture: creativity and continuity.

An obsession with the obvious, we assert. But many would like to forget that the slave trade was a pact between White and Black, that it was a question, not only of stealing and snatching, but of selling and buying. Contrary to popular belief that communal Africa was celestially innocent, moralistic and not materialistic, the fact is that African materialism and inhumanism aided and abetted the Trade. Nineteenth century Africa, for example, was much closer to Europe than our dear anthropologists would have us believe: the trade influenced cultures, and quite a few powerful states emerged. It is part of Europe's lies that would have Africa culture-less or culturally static. Europe's lies, but, first, Africa's shame. For, if we are true to our conscience, we must accept that we have been victimizers, not just victims, so that when we suffer or, more importantly, see our brothers suffer, we will be able to empathize with them, act with them to destroy a disease that we helped cultivate.

An obsession with the obvious. Slavery, many scholars claim, preceded racism which, according to that school of thought, was primarily a rationalization of commercial imperialism. Our desire here is not to prove or disprove that position. The essential point is that racism, like slavery, and colonialism, was, and is, a reality. In a situation of freedom, all sorts of positive possibilities exist: communication, reciprocity, progress, humanism. Unfortunately, non-freedom is the reality. Domination is the constant. The millenium is here: materialism, murder for money, man evinced by machine. . . And in the hierarchy of this humanism, Black,

once enslaved, became the beast chained to the lowest rung of the ladder. He has never really recovered. Frantz Fanon has rightly related the reciprocal action of racism and culture. "If culture is the totality of mental and motivating comportments born of the meeting of man with nature and with other men, we must say that racism is, to all intents and purposes, a cultural element. There are therefore cultures with racism and cultures without."⁶ Europe has been guilty for too long. The hypothesis about racial superiority—inferiority is an antediluvian aberration. The Bible shows the existence of discrimination according to heritage, and Aristotle already expressed the notion of peoples being free from birth while others were born slaves. Inter-religious hatred, it should be affirmed, is easy to eradicate, while biological and racial barrier is insurmountable. And "people of colour"—what colour is white? we ask—are always victims. Some of the most revered luminaries of French civilization that we studied are overtly racist: Voltaire, Montaigne, Renan, Rousseau. . . Of course, such revelations often come after the euphoria of education, after the degrees have been signed, sealed and delivered. For example, it was shocking for me to learn that the cultured, christian Paul Claudel, whose dramas I studied in undergraduate school, was the same French Ambassador to the United States who stopped the stage version of René Maran's *Batouala* from being presented to an American audience. "Racism involves the assertion that inequality is absolute and unconditional, i.e., that a race is inherently and by its very nature superior or inferior to others quite independently of the physical conditions of its habitat and of social factors."⁷ This unproven assumption of biological, perpetual superiority, this system of discrimination and ethnic exploitation, has been Europe's great contribution to human culture. Social darwinism or evolutionism, and goblinism, and biological determinism, all verbal expressions of the same phenomenon, stem from the fallacy of a pure race. It may be shocking, but it is true that admixture of races has been happening since the beginning of human life

and the myth of blood—racists claim a correlation between hybrid and degeneracy of the race—is evidence of ignorance of a basic biological fact, that genes are not connected with blood. The Frenchman, Gobineau, helped give sanction to the notion of race and with imperialism and slavery and miscegenation,—what an irony that the more mixing white man did, the more he proclaimed purity!—racism crossed the seas to America and the Caribbean, creating a conglomeration of octoroons, and quattoons, and mulattoes, and high-yellows, and Congos. . . , with outlandish apportionment of blood quota.

In all the travesty, two points need be retained: one, racism is a cultural problem. For example, Jews have suffered holocausts and pogroms, and the controllers of Hitler's concentration camps are still being hounded all over the globe. Two, racism is also a colour problem and, the inhumanism of antisemitism notwithstanding, skin-colour does constitute a prison-cell and many in this supersonic age still suffer the desperation, despondency and disillusionment of colour discrimination. The Jew can melt easily into the crowd while the Black—remember the first image proposed at the beginning of this lecture—remains outstanding, a dark dot on a white canvass. In order to have a total picture, colour and culture, complementary constants, have to be considered together.

Still an obsession with the obvious. In culturally liberated, colour-emancipated Nigeria, light skin is superior. And I remember once again my secondary-school days. Days of dare-devil desertion of the boarding-house to visit Kingsway Stores with my friends. And we judged the quality of our girls by the colour of their skin. And much has changed since, for the lighter, naturally. Nku, Cocoa Butter, Venus, Ambi, these are the potions used "for radiant look; glowing skin; to combat spots and dark lines and fade uneven colour blotches". And the hair, too kinky for our liking, is "moisturized, conditioned, straightened, shampooed, silked, conked, given

body and bounce. . ." Unknown to us, maybe, we are still students of the "civilizing mission".

Part of that mission is the sermon of universality, logically resultant of civilization. "Negroes are the only people in this world who are set apart because they are who they are, and at the same time told to forget who they are by the same people who set them apart in the first place."⁸ You must subsume your colour in the culture and let the latter coalesce with the way of life of the West. The controversy about Black culture has raged for quite a while and we cannot but address the issue here. Is there a Black culture? Our opinion is, that it depends. . . When, in 1956, Black artists and writers met in the Sorbonne, and convened again in 1959 in Rome, culture was at the centre of conversation and, as must be expected, no decision was taken as to definitions and delimitations. Subsequent convergences have still not resolved the divergences. If, due to our past of dispersal and depersonalization, new geographical, economic and cultural entities have been created, we cannot and must not forget that our present of desperation and despair calls for a cultural revolution based upon new rapports and re-affirmation of forgotten values. Some wish to forget the past, convinced that the present is everything. Frantz Fanon is, to a certain extent, representative of that group. However, we prefer the standpoint of Aimé Césaire, and Jacques-Stephen Alexis who, while insisting upon the national particularities of culture, also see the link between various contributory sources: in the case of Haiti, African, European, and Amerindian, with the first as the most significant. On his part, Fanon is understandably most interested in economic and political revolution. It should be said in his defence that, in spite of his revolutionary fervour, he knows that the colour black, a symbolic creation of Civilization, is a burden to the Black man. In fact, colonialism in its various forms, is part of that burden. Besides, the fanonian cleavage of present from past is less viable given the affinity between him and the existentialists, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, in particular. Also, he

must have learnt some valuable lessons as a student of Aimé Césaire's in Martinique.

Quite appropriate to our position is the cultural nationalism of Amílcar Cabral who, in line with Alexis and Césaire, sees society, Black society, as bearer and creator of culture, while emphasising the need to pose cultural problems as a function of national independence. "Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history (. . .) National liberation is necessarily an act of culture."⁹ First, freedom, then, in that new atmosphere, culture will blossom. This viewpoint runs counter to that of Senghor who affirms, "Cultural liberation is a *sine qua non* for political liberation."¹⁰ Cabral, before his assassination, travelled to, among other places, America where he enunciated his solidarity with Blacks in the common struggle for decolonization which, as we have clearly stated, includes an end to racial oppression. Such solidarity is significant; for, the statement made by Fanon in 1952, holds true for 1984: "In the collective unconscious of *homo occidentalis*, the negro, or, if you prefer, black colour, symbolizes disease, sin, misery, death, war, famine. . ."¹¹ The collective unconscious depends upon a cultural imposition. Only a revolution can stem the tide of White Justice, White Truth, White Virgin; and the tidal wave is submerging Africa, the Caribbean, America, anywhere with a community contemptuously called coloured.

We stated earlier that creative activity is one of the processes of culture. Once we are agreed that Blacks have a culture, or cultural communities, there is no gainsaying that literature is part of that condition. Still, several questions are raised: what literature? what writer? what society? questions on essence, form and content, writer and society. . . Now, to discuss literature is to discuss language. "Language," states Alick West, "grew as a form of social organization. Literature as art continues that growth. It lives language; it carries on the social activity of which language in its very existence is the creation and creator."¹² As we affirmed earlier, Civilization, that is, the West, taught us a particular language.

Images of Prospero and Caliban. Symbols of the culture of racism. From *coloured*, to *negro*, to *nigrab*, to *nigger*, Black has moved down the path of nullification. Once Caliban learnt the language, he changed its codification and gave it his own particular connotation; thus, from *nigger*, through *Afro-American*, to *Black-American* and *Afro-Caribbean*, to *African of the diaspora*, the slave has climbed to the heights of re-humanization. In francophony, where colonialism, more subtle, more civilized, successfully created new men, *le Franco-Africain* and *le Français d'outre-mer*, language has itself remained subtle. Only, like a snake, the subtle racist is sneaky and slimy and, when angry, can snap with a deadly sting. Then, *le nègre* (read *le bon nègre*) suddenly becomes *sale*—dirty nigger, brother of a beast, monstrosity of monstrosities, cousin of the simian species. Nonetheless, the francophones have evolved a language of their own, especially in the Caribbean where Creole, formerly considered repulsive and shameful, is now proudly spoken. Moreover, *le negre* is often replaced by *le noir*.

The cultural revolution has taken place in literature which, no longer imitative of a European model alien to its roots, has established an aesthetic of the concrete, the real. If language is the essence of culture, the repository of a society's knowledge of itself and of other societies, literature has become the expression of culture. Still an obsession with the obvious. The slave must use all the resources at his disposal as instrument to overthrow the oppressor, and it is only when you are free, and with leisure, that you can relax in an easy chair to enjoy nature, savour the scent of flowers, make rhyme and rhythm at will. Art for art's sake. A screen of imagery and diction and sound; fastidious, crisp, cutting verses, the craft of the bard. Words meandering through metric lines like the peaceful, sensuous waters of the Seine, the gentle style of the novelist. The whole sublimated in a high sense of form and metre, a rash of rhythmic concoctions . . . , but saying what? The message matters more than the

manner; however; both form and content are, in the final analysis, complementary:

The intracultural nature of art and the manner of its production, decides the lingering controversy about form and content. They are not separate, nor are they fused. Form is the resolution and transformation of content, not the mere pressing up of a given kind of content in a particular way; and in the process a harmony is achieved which leaves form and content visible yet one. . .¹³

The opinion here is, if such dynamic interaction is not achieved, better to have a palpable content than a perfect, but pointless form. The immediacy of the former supersedes the latter's luxury.

Which brings us back to the colour and culture black. Black, eunuch in the world-wide white harem. Black, castrated by Civilization. Black, colonized and christianized to doomsday. Certain critics of the West have not minced words in expressing their contempt for any idea of Black literature. Here is one statement on Black-American writing:

There is, obviously, no 'Negro experience' in America, though some Negro polemicists among our authors may try to make one think so. There are twenty million separate experiences (. . .). As there is no one 'Negro experience', there is also, obviously, no 'Negro Writer'. Most writers who are Negroes hate the deindividuation.¹⁴

The man's name is Littlejohn and, no doubt, John has a small mind. Quintessential of racist paternalism, such an attempt at americanizing Black writing and writer is easily condemned by the very title of Littlejohn's book. The American Negro is both American and Negro and he had better remember it. When, in his criticism, Littlejohn defines every writer as a 'solitary being', he forgets that solitariness

is not solitude, that aloneness does not equate loneliness and that, even where solitude is the estate, it is not absolute. By writing, the writer is expressing a desire, is making an effort to reach the community and the Black writer, in particular, has come to accept his social role. Communication of solidarity with the community, such is the condition of the writer. Williams calls it 'transmission of human experience'. Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Aimé Césaire, all underline the essentials of mirror and vision. When the writer rejects his role, he is guilty of bad faith, self-denial, self-hate. "I am not a black writer. I am a writer first and foremost; I just happen to be black." As if the art so cherished, so consuming were practicable in a void. As if the Black writer were indeed, through his art, from the iniquities of existence. As if were not a world of white. . . The reality is that the writer sees life from a socio-cultural vantage point; that he has a distinct frame of reference that the other does not have, cannot have. It is this particularity that white critics, mouth-piece of white society, detest and fear. For, if the Black writer is to be true to the realities of his life, his work cannot but protest against his and his people's condition. A question of colour, and culture. In an interview with this writer in Paris, in 1973, Mme Camille René-Maran, widow of the reputed precursor of negritude, sang the homage to her precious husband: "He wanted to be a writer. *Batouala* was not his favourite work; he wanted to write other things, not to be known as author of little negro works."¹⁵ The statement hardly needs our comments. One fact is undeniable: a writer belongs to a society, a community of human beings with whom he shares certain experiences. In the Black context, the experiences are deep, dogged, dogging the psyche, refusing to go away. Hence, the common element of autobiography in Black writing. Slavery, colonialism, racism, these are everyday traumas. "The social takes precedence over the aesthetic, each act, gesture, and movement is political, and continual rebellion separates the insane from the sane, the

robot from the revolutionary."¹⁶

Sometimes, the writer's avowed total adherence to the universe of art is shown up for what it is, a cop-out, another form of colonization. And there is the portrait of Ray, in Claude McKay's *Banjo*. Ray, West Indian, intellectual, writer, mired in the mud of Marseilles with vagabonds of various backgrounds, claims to be writing, not for his race but for anyone that can stand what he calls "a real story no matter where he comes from." Soon enough, he tells his American and African friends a story and the latter find that his tale resembles a lot an African story. Ray opens up, once the "civilized" stand is shot through with the reality of his africanity. So, Ray, the real writer, is very conscious of his culture. He has read Maran's *Batouala*, and he denounces Senghor and other African ambassadors to the West: "Take Senghor and his comrades in propaganda for example. They are the bitterest and most humorless of propagandists and they are all married to white women. It is as if the experience has oversoured them. As if they thought it would bring them closer to the white race, only to realize too late that it couldn't."¹⁷

Senghor, the most famous ideologue of negritude, the militant of Senegalese independence, the apostle of the Civilization of the Universal. A great deal has been said about negritude and there is no need to raise any more dust over the issue. However, it need be said that the movement played an important role in the 30s, harmonizing and synthesizing often conflicting and contradictory standpoints of Blacks, in order to formulate a community of action. Only, unfortunately, the deck was stacked against the young men from the onset. Negative was the source; negative, the situation; negative, the seeds. Paris, centre of culture, western culture, happily welcomed her adopted children who, even before arriving at Civilization, were aspiring to the glory and grandeur of the métropole. Their revolt, if it be so termed, was born out of despair and desperation and their objectives

were at best ambiguous. Seeds of solidarity were sown, not with the mass of their people but, first, with a handful of progressives in Europe and, second, with the colonial masters themselves. If they were clamouring for acceptance by their people, they were obviously doing it in the wrong place, at the wrong time. But, at the right place and time, too; for, the masses were there for the taking. And, sooner or later, the big black bosses took them to the promised land of independence, with the flag designed by a Parisian, the national anthem composed by an ex-governor's darling wife and sung by her charming daughter. Independence, as in idiocy and incompetence; prostitution and pimping; retrogression and "return to the source". The striking accomplishment of negritude is the imposition of the politico-cultural warriors on the people as life-presidents. It is this political opportunism that sickens the mind of observers. Poet-politicians abound, only they are mostly pimps and prostitutes.

There is the necessity for the writer to look inside himself and outside at society. However, many dare not do so. They are either too scared or too sick. They withdraw into their cultured cocoon, an intellectualized house built upon hypocrisy. They sun-tan on a beach of bastardization, in a dream-land populated by the dead. With such men of culture, as Fanon calls them, the white man is never far away. Their vehement, aggressive exhibitionism is only a camouflage for a desire to be pardoned and their "culture of the culture" becomes an everlasting prison. We should note also that many who criticize negritude are not aware of this basic white presence. The South African, Ezekiel Mphahlele, states:

I personally cannot think of the future of my people in South Africa as something in which the white man does not feature. Whether he likes it or not, our destinies are inseparable.¹⁸

If only he knew that the ethos of the movement that he criticizes so virulently and viciously is the constant presence

of the white man. . . Before Fanon made the statement, the negritudists had seen that "there is only one destiny for the black man, and it is white"¹⁹ Of course, while Fanon was using a spiteful humour, tingling, needling irony, his elders, choking in the bow-tie of Civilization, all wrapped up in the winter-coat of frozen France, took the matter too seriously. On the other hand, there is, in actuality, a most serious side to it all: consider the relationship between the poet and the people; between the publisher and print; between literature and life, and you will come to paint a picture of the colonization of the writer. Mind and matter, colonized, need desperately to be saved, even today.

We have taken a stand against negritude; however, let it be understood that there are aspects of it that we find useful and necessary. A cultural matrix for oppressed Africans, from the continent and the diaspora, serves a useful purpose. Culture here is considered in the sense of the whole life of a people. No renunciation of heritage, but a synthesis of old and new into a new whole, through the collectivity. Collectivity brings to life solidarity, and solidarity is the opposite of solitude. As enunciated earlier, negritude had a chance to achieve much. One of its greatest barriers, perhaps the symbol of its downfall, was Assimilation. The ambassador of the ancestors "dies to himself to be reborn in the Other. He is not assimilated; he assimilates himself, he identifies himself to the Other, which is the best way of knowing him."²⁰ Senghor's 1956 verbal gymnastics can deceive only sycophants. Why know the Other when he does not acknowledge your presence, or only does so by declaring that you are a dog? How good does it feel to be dead alive? Why die at all when you are born to live? Too many concessions, too much conniving, too much consideration. Black Skin, Mongrelized Mind. "I dreamed of a sunny world in the fraternity of my brothers with blue eyes."²¹ The love of Black for White. Acceptance of White superiority. Assimilation is a euphemism for Alienation and Acculturation.

At this point, I would like to refer briefly to the Inaugural

Lecture recently given at the University of Ibadan by my friend, Abiola Irele, the first Nigerian Professor of French. When he speaks "In Praise of Alienation", he is, of course, stating clearly our debts to western culture. Our belief, however, is, that alienation need not be celebrated. The phrase itself could constitute a taboo for many people. Once assumed, internalized, moulded to the existential conditions, compartment and cultural base of the community, elements of alienation cease to exist as such. Something new is created, and it is all part of cultural dynamism and openness. In other words, alienation must not be allowed to remain a state of our existence. The evils it breeds are patent in literature. Senghor's path of cultural diplomacy is followed by others. Camara Laye's African child, after his period of initiation at home, boards a plane for Paris and, grown up, the hero of *Dramouss* returns home with his Parisian wife to continue the life on the verge already begun abroad. The metropolitan magnet draws to its murderous meshes many a hero of our fiction. In Ferdinand Oyono's *Chemin d'Europe*, Olympe Bhêly-Quénou's *L'Initié*, Ousmane Sembene's *Le dockernqir*, Jean Dodo's *Sacrés dieux d'Afrique*, each hero goes to see Paris and die. Mental murder choreographed by the colonial master. Suicide of the colonized self and birth in the Other, to paraphrase Senghor. Fortunately, some of France's adopted sons do not wish to die. An example is the explosive poetry of Léon Damas with the orotund, acerbic verses describing the sorry state of the alienated.

I feel totally ridiculous with all what they relate including what they serve in the afternoon a little hot water and ice-cold cake.

.....

I feel totally ridiculous among them accomplice among them pimp among them throat-cutter my hands frightfully red with the blood of their ci-vi-li-zation.²²

Damas's poignant picture of the negro accomplice of Civilization sticks to the mind indelibly. The Guyanese, *enfant terrible* of negritude, already visualizes the revolt to come against Europe, defined in all its hate and hypocrisy. Images of blood and barbarity. The Black, his eyes open, demystified, will repay the master in his own coin. The colour red not only stands for the blood of Black victims spattered on the christian steps of slavery and colonialism but, more significantly, it represents the blood of the latter, now victim of the slave's violence. While Damas is condemned by history to a life of complicity and duality in the West, another poet, David Diop, stands removed from the West, laughs and, indeed, sneers at the Black bourgeoisie, alienated while pompously proclaiming their africanity.

My brother with the white teeth shining under the hypocritical compliment.

My brother with the golden glasses

On your eyes blued by the master's word

My poor brother in the dinner-jacket with silk lapel

Squealing and susurrating and swaggering in the salons of condescendence

We are sorry for you

.....

But when satiated with words sonorous and empty

Like the bag hanging over your shoulders

You will tread on Africa's bitter red earth

These anguished words will then mark the rhythm of your worried walk

I feel so alone so alone here!²³

Double solitude of the cringing, acculturated bourgeois. Two events of great interest occurred in 1956: in Paris, a young negro from Africa was walking the streets of the centre of Civilization for the first time in his life. He was in

heaven, inebriated, flying high, having realized the greatest dream of his life. Across the seas, in America, another man, white, having had his skin darkened with the aid of chemicals was trudging southern streets, living Black. The experiences of both, diametrically opposed, yet inextricably linked, show the extent to which racism would go, and how mongrelized and mangled is the mind of the alienated. Bernard Dadie's *Un negre a Paris* — it is best translated a *nigger*. . . — is a vertical movement, physically and symbolically, up toward Civilization, while John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* is also a vertical movement, but downward to the nauseating nadir of despair, Griffin's courage must, of course, be complimented, while the sheer naiveté, in feriority complex and catholic, compromising notions of Dadié, even in the face of the most blatant exhibition of racism and colonialist paternalism, underscore the tragedy of our culture. In passing, we should note that John Howard Griffin, now deceased, is a unique soul. Most Whites must thank their stars for not being Black and even a temporary transformation, the sojourn of a season in hell, — and how about if the pigmentation were to become permanent? — must have little appeal. While White cannot be permanently Black, cultural transference cannot be complete either. It is possible for aliens and the alienated to learn and know cultural patterns, but they cannot make it wholly theirs. They cannot attain the depths of the culture; they cannot create viable works. Of all the aliens observing African culture, there is hardly any that attempts to understand it sincerely. The positions range from racist exoticism to partial participation. Joyce Cary (and I have often wondered why men take female pseudonyms), in his novel, *Mr. Johnson*, exemplifies such a racist position. His book is like a fairy tale but Cary exudes such confidence, and his tale is so complete and consistent, that his readers would easily equate fiction to fact. The quality of novels like Cary's is that they reveal the real, repulsive face of the new African: Mr. Johnson, the man with the title, and the foreign name, exhibiting his European shoes as a sign of superiority over

his people, ready to die in the hands of the white master because it would be death leading to re-birth at the right hand of God.

Still an obsession with the obvious. The case-file of the alienated must be placed side by side with that of the exile, since both types are brothers, if not twins, in the flight to the sham freedom offered by Civilization. The exile comes in several forms. Williams distinguishes between exile, self-exile, rebel, and vagrant. Whether inside society or outside, the exile is a man suffering from solitude. Whether he stays in a foreign land, or he stays home while being away from home, the exile lacks cultural base, the scene, the sights, the smells, the songs, the sentiments of home. Many writers are in this category. Of course, dreams may keep them alive; imagination and memories may serve their purpose, since culture is dynamic. Heritage, haunting, hallucinatory, may be continued in pockets of populations placed in metropolitan ghettoes. And a new literary universe can be constructed. Only all these are consolations. Mphahlele, South African exile, talked of "a mood of placelessness in poetry. The concrete stuff thins out; feeling becomes formalized, ideas become dominant. When concrete objects come back into one's verse, they evoke a *nostalgia*." ²⁴ Even if a new sense of place is developed, the culture cannot be. Which is the explanation given by the South African writer when, after twenty years of voluntary exile, he returned home in 1977 to teach at the University of Witwatersrand. A move back into life, according to him, away from "the ghetto of the mind". While there might be reasons to criticize the writer and scholar for his action, it is no doubt preferable to that of many who stay away only in order to enjoy the crumbs from the table of the paternalistic civilizer.

Exiles, vagrants, vagabonds, such are the Blacks inhabiting the Marseilles of McKay's *Banjo*. Their life, without direction, is marked by cleavage of cultures and, to a certain extent, cultural racism based upon the assumed superiority

of the American. However, the most important thematic aspect of *Banjo* is not the caste system but the link, assumed or rejected, between all the preys of the European predator: "Niggers is niggers all ovah the wul." In the same city of Marseilles live the characters of Sembene's stories; they are all "exiles forever keeping past facts and making a meal out of them, a meal of the present. . ." To console themselves, to conquer the white world in their own way, the exiles take the most direct route: they take the white woman. White woman, the paragon of beauty, the apple of the negro's eye, his passport to earthly paradise. The list of the odd couples is endless. Andrée-Veneuse²⁵, Jacqueline Fara²⁶, Genevieve-Ambroise²⁷, Maryam-Karim²⁸. . . Without exception, the men live out the western myth:

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*. . .
By loving me, (the white woman) proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.²⁹

However, miscegenation, far from being a means of reaching the mainstream, is at best a harbinger of half happiness attained behind closed doors, away from the public. When the two solitudes are exposed to the realities of the outside, the Black realizes that he has made a mistake. At that moment of revelation, some commit suicide; some remain in limbo; some take their woman and flee to Africa.

Culture, we insist, is not simply learned behaviour and there are definitely limitations to intercultural communication. Even America, the 'melting pot', has particularities within its confines: Japanese-American, Chinese-American, Polish-American. . ., Afro- or Negro-American, and Black-American. It is interesting that only this last group is descri-

bed at any time by colour-reference; and, of course, Blacks have remained the ones most excluded from the mainstream.

Still an obsession with the obvious. Let us return momentarily to the first image of our discussion. Both the unfortunate friends forced out of America and those that remained to drink from the well of material wisdom, normally have a choice. They can definitely go home again. Not the Black-American; not the West Indian. A question of colour, and culture. After the Middle Passage had been crossed, some did go back, to Liberia, to Freetown; but those were the exceptions. Garveyism started, spluttered awhile, and was silenced. America had to be home, but it was not. Let us listen to McKay: "My heart grows sick with hate, becomes lead,/For this my race that has no home on earth."³⁰ The white man is a "tiger in the (Blacks') throat", ready to tear him to pieces and snatch his soul away. Laments Conrad Rivers, another poet: "To be born unnoticed/, Is to be born black,/And left out of the grand adventure."³¹ Living in America is a "war"³² and the most grievous error would be to presuppose that the enemy is moral. Such is the "black man's burden"³³ that, from childhood, the constraints, the control, the imprisonment in the ghetto of both mind and matter, are real, and seemingly absolute. Countee Cullen relates:

Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart-filled head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, 'Nigger'

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.³⁴

Memories of psychological rape, of rejection by human beings whose most remarkable distinction is the paleness of their skin. Murder of the mind. But Black is resilient. Black is a survivor. Only, before resistance comes resignation. If you are lucky to be ofay, you try to "pass" for white, like Nella Larsen. Note that *Clotel*, heroine of the first Black-American novel of the same title written by William Brown (1853), is almost white. And if you are not near white, you try to prove that even though you are black, your heart is white. Emma Lou, ebony-black heroine of Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* dies slowly of despair because of her skin-shade. Images of Uncle Tom and Gunga Din. Black Skin, White Masks, says Fanon. Only, the life in limbo of the white or white-washed negro is built on quicksand (title of a Larsen novel) and not on concrete. The war, many have realized, will not be won by living a life of lies. Yet some critics condemn the insistence of the writers on the white problem. John Killens, Black aesthetician, affirms:

Just as surely as East is East and West is West, there is a 'black' psyche in America, and there is a 'white' one, and the sooner we face up to this psychological, social and cultural reality, the sooner twain shall meet. Our emotional chemistry is different from white America. Your joy is very often our anger, and your despair our hope. Most of us came here in chains, and many of you came here to escape your chains. Your freedom was our slavery.³⁵

The present is, as already stated, linked to the past. Racism and Slavery. America and Africa. For the Black in America, the present is only a nightmarish re-living of the past. So, we must understand why some would wish to be white; why the hate of Africa at times seeths through the smokescreen; why, indeed, the man has been able to manacle the black mind to the metallic, miasmatic matrix of the Great Society.

Black is where thatched temples burn,
Incense to carved ebon-wood;
Where traders shaped my father's pain,
His person and his place,
Among dead statues in a frieze,
In the spectrum of his race.³⁶

If only white America had sincerely emancipated the slave, Africa would have been dead to him forever. With the race war raging, and freedom becoming less and less real, cultural affinity to Africa has come to the fore. When such affinity is questioned, the very state of questioning accentuates the presence of possibilities. "What is Africa to me?" asks Cullen. Like several of his peers of the period named the Harlem Renaissance, the poet answers with images of negativity: 'jungle star or jungle track'; 'wild, barbaric birds'; 'bats circling through the night' . . . However, others see another Africa, an idealised Garden of Eden in which Blacks, free of constraints, live peacefully without a care. Of course, the ideal is unreal, but the primary use of it is the element of identity. Just as the notion of negritude, encapsulated in the Singhonian ideology, needs to be seen as a flexible, multifaceted philosophy, or psychology, so also do we need to understand the importance of propaganda in the American condition. Kathryn Johnson says it best: "People who have not yet seen the glory of their blackness need propaganda as they need food."³⁷

As America keeps re-imposing new forms of slavery on her ex-slaves, the Black dilemma continues apace. What we would like to re-affirm is the African presence. For as long as Black is a colour, and a culture, the African-American continuum will remain. The communication will continue, consciously or subconsciously, whether the American exhibits his superiority complex and de-africanity (like Baldwin and Wright), or the African, his inferiority complex, or contempt for everything that America stands for (like Armah and Clark). After attending the Paris Conference of Negro Writers and

Artists (1956), James Baldwin, according to whom a yawning gulf separates the American from "all other men of color", observed:

It became clear. . . that there *was* something which all black men held in common, something which cut across opposing points of view, and placed in the same context their widely dissimilar experience. What they held in common was their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they had in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people.³⁸

The ache to come to the world as men remains acute today as ever before. As it is felt in America, so is it in the Caribbean. The Caribbean has its negrophobia. An octoroon is a person with one-eighth negro blood, the offspring of a quadroon — who is a one-quarter negro and offspring of a mulatto and a white—and a white. Negroes are hated by mulattoes who abhor the whites for detesting them. At the time of slavery, there were a few free Blacks but the colour-mania of the mulatto was so deep that he would rather commit suicide than be slave to a Black. It is therefore not surprising that racial and cultural consciousness has largely served the cause of emancipation. It is a concrete factor, this injustice meted out to people of a certain colour-shade. The evolutionary processes, similar to the American, are, nonetheless, distinct, in that we are not dealing with one country, nor with one colony under one colonial master. Still one success stands out, that of Haiti where *indigénisme*, based upon the peasants' Africa-oriented culture, served as a means of forging the nation. The Caribbean is symbolized by Haiti. There is the socialist negritude of Jacques Roumain who, in his fictional masterpiece, *Masters of the Dew* (1946), proves that man, Black man, through hard work, and agriculture,

can become master of his destiny. The Caribbean is also the dilemma of the mulatto, whose predicament is spotlighted in a calypso by the Trinidadian, Mighty Dongla:

If they sending Indians to India
And Negroes back to Africa
Won't somebody please just tell me
Where they sending poor me, poor me
I am neither one nor the other
Six of one half a dozen the other
If they serious 'bout sending back people for true
They got to split me in two.

The racial and cultural split of the mulatto can only be resolved in the Caribbean, not in Africa. To find a solution, the cultural and racial exile has to go back home and, as has been proven by the likes of Aimé Césaire, acceptance of the quality of the colour and the culture black is the surest road leading back home to the community. Meanwhile, Africa will continue to serve as the source, as the means, not the end. The point has been excellently made by Jacques-Stéphen Alexis, and Fanon, and Césaire. Africa will be source and means, we affirm. But the diaspora, too, can play the same role. Césaire uses the Haitian example to sound a note of warning to Africa's independent countries. The lesson of his *Tragedy of King Christophe*³⁹ is that independence, even when won with the blood of the people, is only the beginning. The real test, the task, is how to assume freedom, build upon it to create an authentic culture of the mass of the people. Here, the problem is not primarily skin-colour, although the stigma on black still remains: Christophe is black; his rival, Petion, mulatto.

The Caribbean dilemma of pigmentocracy resembles the tragedy called South Africa; only the latter's "narcissism of small differences" is more absolutist and frightful. South Africa where the black man has no birthright. Where the

Blacks are not human. Where life is the nightmare called apartheid. Deprivation. Dispossession. Depersonalization. The trauma is total, physical, mental, cultural. "Realism means being a non-person, existing by the grace of the whites. Realism means entrenchment in ethnocentricity."⁴⁰

Still an obsession with the obvious. The Black man needs a pass to present his black body to carry the White man, his burden, in the land that should belong to him but that belongs to the Other. The Black man is forced to live far from his family, in order to be exploited by the master. An Afrikaner writer, Breyten Breytenbach, has called apartheid vulture culture. And we note that the image of the vulture, voracious, vicious, violent, snatching its prey away and devouring it with impunity, is a constant in the literature of oppressed, Black people. Example: David Diop.

The vultures constructed in the shadow of their claws
The bloody monument of the era of tutelage
At that time
Laughter agonized in the metallic hell of the roads
And the monotonous rhythm of Pater Nosters
Covered the howlings of made-for-profit plantations
Oh the acidic memory of snatched kisses
Promises mutilated by the shock of submachine-guns
You strange men who were not men
You knew all the books you did not know love.⁴¹

The vulture, cunning, christian, civilized, killed the mind and chained the body to the carts of Civilization and thus the Citadel was constructed. What Diop remembers as part of history is reality, the only Reality, for the Black in South Africa.

Apartheid is the state and the condition of being apart. It is the no man's land between peoples. But this gap is not a neutral space. It is the artificially created distance necessary to attenuate, for the practitioners, the very

raw reality of racial, economic, social and cultural discrimination and exploitation. It is the space of the white man's being. It is the distance needed to convince himself of his denial of the other's humanity.⁴²

In the cauldron of apartheid South Africa, life and literature depict this lack of humanity, black and white. For, what apartheid does in the end is de-humanize the dehumanizer himself. In trying to make a beast out of Black, the white man himself becomes the beast. Force of power. Force of fear. The more inhuman the oppressor, the stronger the oppressed. And the conflict of colour continues apace. A fact of life: Sandra Laing, ten years old, born to white parents, but blessed with dark features, is suddenly re-classified as 'coloured' by afrikanerdom. She is compelled to leave her home and live in another neighbourhood. A fact of life: Breyten Breytenbach, Afrikaner, militant poet critical of apartheid, returns from exile. Sentenced to nine years in prison, he repents, pronounces a pathetic *mea culpa* in court, apologizes for having called Vorster a butcher in a poem. Breytenbach is reprieved. Racial redemption, you might say; the prodigal son is back home to support the cause of apartheid. Voice of conscience and vision is suddenly silenced by another, of collaboration.

And the nexus of fact and fiction, undeniable, implacable, dictates the rules of the *danse macabre* in a country rich in material but bankrupt in mind. Steve Biko was young, intelligent, and Black. He was murdered by afrikanerdom for being conscious of his colour and stating the obvious. In 1984, Wessel Ebersohn writes a novel, *Store Up The Anger*, with Biko as model. Indeed, South Africa is *the* proof: the creative artist in order to *live* cannot but create from the concrete. In a colonial situation – and apartheid is worse than that, since the oppressor has obviated the owner of the land – only the cowardly among the colonized concentrate solely on fiction with no reference to reality. The colonizer, naturally, does that, since his fallacious creation, the myth of

Black – smelling strangeness, a disease worse than the plague, lust, barbarity, indolence, stagnation, mental sterility – has to be kept alive. Liberation, we have stated, is a necessary condition for the existence of culture. Only this: even when chained and cudgelled, culture refuses to die. The fire of freedom urges it on. And whether consciously or unconsciously, the colour black constitutes a convergence, internally among the compatriots, and externally between them and the oppressed elsewhere. A Guyanese living in England and temporarily resident in America travels to South Africa. Arriving at his hotel, he calls for room service.

The young, black attendant seemed very surprised yet pleased to discover that I was black, and said something to me in a language I could not understand.

- I'm afraid I don't speak your language, I replied.
- You're not Zulu? he asked.
- No. I was secretly flattered at his mistake.
- Where you from? he wanted to know.
- South America, I said.
- You know Mr. Bob Foster, sir?
- No.
- He's from your country.
- No. He's from the United States. (. . .)
- He lived in this hotel, he said.

Then, smiling, 'He's a great boxer. A big champion. He beat the white man. He beat the South African.'

The smile was wide. I paid and left. Evidently, Mr. Bob Foster had made a deep impression here.⁴³

The above incident is to be compared to many others, in America, or Europe, where Black encounters White. Remember all the Great White Hopes trying to beat Muhammad Ali, and the division of the audience, live and otherwise,

along racial lines. Some might say that is sports, entertainment; but we say that is life. And literature, sports, politics, economics, are all aspects of the totality of culture. The bourgeois Black denying knowledge of Bob Foster, once light-heavyweight champion of the world, may be guilty of snobbishness: intellectuals are not supposed to be concerned with banalities like boxing! He knows Foster is American, thus proving that nation comes before colour. Nonetheless, we note that he is secretly flattered to be mistaken for a Zulu. Besides, his visit to South Africa is a result of a feeling of brotherhood for those imprisoned in apartheid hell. The very real danger is that those that are not directly, personally victimized, tend to rationalize, and forget. That, of course, suits the victimizer. It is part of western culture to create and encourage conditions of conflict among the oppressed, and to give support to the least committed. That, we say, is life, in the colonies of the capitalist West. And we see the larger-than-life figure of Mr. Michael Jackson, singer emeritus, winning every award possible, projected by mass media as the all-American boy. We see Mr. Jackson with his wet look, highly inflammable, lamarred, sequined, with his aquiline nose, shaped thus with the knife of the plastic surgeon so that he may look better than black. Mr. Jackson, lover of E.T. the extra-terrestrial. Now, we do not doubt the quality of the rhythm, but we note with disgust that Mr. Jackson, like Elvis Presley before him – Presley who thought a Black was not good enough to shine his shoes! – is racist, and Blacks are his victims. Still an obsession with the obvious. Some would say that is mere entertainment. Entertainment, they forget, is an aspect of life; indeed, the only life for Blacks in the colonial context. They forget also that the singer is a bard, a poet, playing the role of the *griot*, and the visionary. To Mr. Jackson, a hero to many a Nigerian, we prefer Stevie Wonder, blind, black visionary.

Have I lived to see the milk and honey land
Where hate's a dream and love forever stands
Or is this a vision in my mind?⁴⁴

Wonder has used his talent to promote a culture based upon a particular heritage; he has, like David Diop, honed the hurricane for that future when it will no longer be necessary to ask the question: "Why must my color black make me a lesser man?"

Still an obsession with the obvious. In discussing culture, the role of Woman has often been downplayed and distorted. One of the achievements of slavery and colonialism is to abuse Black woman and, with the help of black bourgeoisie, obliterate her cultural originality. The result is that, today, Black woman is experiencing a multiple negative or a triple jeopardy. She is black, woman, and poor. The problematic of black femininity has, unfortunately, become dangerously connected with western feminism. A question of colour, and culture. Black female experience and psyche, whether in Africa, female sexuality was not emphasized. On the contrary, it was woman's role as mother, as backbone of the family, is not the straight and narrow path leading to the paradise of Emancipation. Man can tell the truth about that; for, what exactly has the West offered him as freedom? Let us take the common issue of sexism, which appears to be one of the focal points of today's feminism. In pre-colonial Africa, female sexuality was not emphasized. On the contrary it was woman's role as mother, as backbone of the family, contributory to the continuity of the community, often economically independent, that was considered essential. Happily, remnants of that role remain. In spite of his chauvinism and neo-colonialist tendencies, the male has constantly appreciated those basic qualities of the female. First, the beauty of the black woman.

Look upon the blackness of my woman/and be filled with the delight of it/her blackness a beacon among the insipid/faces around her/proudly she walks, a sensuous black lily/swaying in the wind/This daughter of Sheba .../my woman wears her blackness like a queen^{4 5}

Black woman, celebrated as an aspect of the demythologization of black as ugly:

Ah,
My black one
Thou art not luminous
Yet an altar of jewels,
An altar of shimmering jewels,
Would pale in the light
Of Thy darkness
Pale in the light
Of Thy nightness.^{4 6}

Black woman, militant, motivator, comrade committed to the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism. There are examples galore in the works of Ngugi Wa Thion'go, Sembène Ousmane, Jacques Roumain, David Diop. Diop's poetic collection, *Coups de pilon*, depicts woman as an active contributor to the dynamics of existence. Woman's beauty is not that of a mannequin, painted and pampered and prostituted, a plaything under the thumb of the pimp. Her beauty, put to the test of time, is entrenched in the temporal. Yet, it is enduring, everlasting, for the very fact that it is genuine, natural, and has survived all forms of violation. Diop, like other writers, insists upon the solidarity of man and woman. When he finds his woman, the black man finds himself. The act of copulation is like a volcano erupting, a cyclonic storm swelling and sweeping all the sadness away. In contemplating love, the poet uses a system of comparison and contrast, just as he does in analyzing the colonial experience. They, White Europe, stand opposite us, Black Africa. The cold of winter versus the warmth of summer. Shadow against the sun. Tarnished lust opposed to true love. And true love is burning, cleansing.

Black woman my hot clamour for Africa
My land of enigma and my fruit of reason

You are dance
 And the myths around me burn
 Around me the wigs of knowledge
 In wild fires of joy in the sky of your steps
 You are dance
 And burn the false gods under your vertical flame
 You are the face of the initiated
 Sacrificing madness near the guardian-tree
 You are the idea of Everything and the voice of the
 Ancestor.

Solemn impetus storming idle dreams
 You are the Word that explodes
 Into miraculous seeds on the hills of oblivion. ⁴⁷

The black dancer is no longer the entertainer stripping naked and shaking her chest and backside before the lust-filled master. She is Africa's child, representative of her aliveness, existence, survival. Dance, we should recall, is a function of life in many an African community; it is present in almost every ceremony. The poet goes further by combining the cultural symbolism with the elemental figure of Black woman. Birth of the child. Re-birth of conscience. Re-habilitation of the culture. Diop's position is thus founded upon the cornerstone of maternal love and honed through the authenticating presence of woman as comrade.

With colonialism, Black woman's role changed: the differences between village and town; country and city; wife and prostitute; woman and whore; mind manipulated by material, wisdom turned into worldliness; culture evinced by Civilization... Sexism or *sexploitation*, describes the evolution quite vividly. Fertility, normal, natural to the continuation of human species, is confronted with sterility, literally and symbolically. Moral is ousted by material, the body is exploited for sexo-billions. Femininity is transformed into feminism. Such is the process of Civilization. The sex game has been, from the beginning, a white problem. From slavery, through

colonialism, to the astronautic age, white woman has always been sheltered, protected by white man who believes that all Blacks are extraordinarily potent sex-machines with prodigious genitals, appetites and superman abilities. White woman has been a recluse for too long, stowed away in the gilded cage by the master who spent sleepless nights sneaking to the bunker of the black female slave, mother of the mulatto micro-society, the master whose days were filled with fear of the phallic presence of the male slave. White woman has been a flower, fragile, fickle, suffering in silence, or slyly sleeping with the sexually superior Black. After all, you cannot take it to your grave! Lady Jane beckons to Leroi the slave who steals into Massa's bed while the latter is stealing out. The reciprocity of curiosity. The reconciliation of conflict. The contact of colours.

Today, the war is raging in the open. The enfranchisement of the slave. The revolt of the second-class citizen. Revolt against sexism is a source of solidarity between races, or is it? Not quite. One, miscegenation is largely a personal revolt, or victory. Two, the conflict between black woman and white woman remains deep, and complex. For now, female chauvinism is opposed to male chauvinism. Victim becomes victimizer; prey, predator. Sex stinks, some claim; so, woman takes woman and we are told that lesbian love is better than living with the lying leech named man. It is a most welcome event, that Black women writers have emerged from darkness to light to tell their own story and, today, in Africa, America and all over, some of them are in the forefront of literary production. However, quite a few of them do not realize that their struggle is not the same as that of the white women writers. Recently, I read a book, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* that I have found most interesting and from which I have taken the following quotation:

Recognition of the operation of racism and class is important in preventing false polarizations between men

and women. Rather than seeing man as the universal oppressor, women will also be seen as partners in oppression and as having the potential of becoming primary oppressors themselves. Above all, by studying the black woman we can avoid isolating sexism from the larger political and economic forces operating in many societies to produce internal colonialism, recolonialism and economic dependency – all of which affect *both* man and woman in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and the impoverished sections of the United States. ⁴⁸

As the author of the above statement frames it: “For the black woman, the enemy is not black men but history.” White women have their nose sniffing the smell of the symbolic sperm of the white rapist. The Black, true inhabitants of human hell, have seen fire and rain, have learnt to distinguish between the soothing drops of a gentle shower and the lashing waves of a storm, Black man, they know, has not lynched; he has been lynched. So Black women know but, somehow, some do not know. Buchi Emecheta, celebrated Nigerian novelist living in England, has used hundreds of pages to spit out her hate for the man who has made her a “second-class citizen.” The consolation here is, that she does not propagage lesbianism and enjoys still “the joys of motherhood”. For Rebeka Njau, Kenyan, it is the opposite, her heroin in *Ripples in the Pool* ⁴⁹ becomes a lesbian on the edge of lunacy. The consolation here is that the writer views her heroin as a veritable failure. Mayotte Capécia, Martinican, and Michele Lacrosil, Gaudeloupian, have both explored the mind of the Black woman who, like the man, lives in a symbolic ghetto of pigmentocracy. The solution seems to be to sell out, to assume a white mask and cleanse the color, as it were, by incessantly seeking a white man, or no man at all. In essence, there is still the necessity for women writers to eliminate the man-woman dichotomy which is a distraction and another facet of the divide-and-rule tactics of colonialism. Both man and woman are contributors to a culture that has

been bastardized and almost bludgeoned to death. The only means to the resolution of the woman problem is through a total solidarity.

One writer that has made the effort to treat black feminism (if anyone insists on the word) as one aspect of the Black experience, is Alice Walker. Her Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*,⁵⁰ is a survival story. Survival of Black woman. Survival of Black culture. Africa and America, brought together in the persons of two youths, each giving of himself to assure the solidarity that they both symbolize. Two sisters separate through the slave system called America. One follows a Black missionary couple to Africa, with the two children of the other, who stays in America and, after being brutalized by her husband, carbon-copy of the stepfather that raped her, arrives at a decision not to love man again. She falls in love with her husband's ex-girl-friend who finally moves into the house. And so the story goes. Through letters exchanged between the sisters, we learn of their diverse experiences. Alice Walker engrosses the reader by her honesty and positivity, by her determination to give her characters the freedom to breathe while breathing into each of them the refreshing, salubrious air of black consciousness. Celie, the victim of man, in spite of her astringent posture, is human enough to try to understand Mr. – (that is all she names him until, toward the end, when she musters the courage, and compassion, to call him Albert). Her sister, Nettie, even though engaged in missionary duties in Africa, is not imposing or impossible. She makes every effort to understand the Africans who, in turn, stretch out the hand of solidarity to her. The two youths that cement this solidarity, acting as currents of cultural linkage, are Adam, Celie's son, and Tashi, the African girl. True to her tradition, Tashi submits herself to the marks of her ethnic group, the Olinka. At first, Adam, already with hopes of marrying her, is shocked. Sooner than later, he also voluntarily takes the Olinka marks. They are married and return to America together. *The Color Purple* takes care of all the differences between

the Blacks in Africa and America. Walker proves beyond doubt that man and woman can be together, even under the greatest tension. No experience could be worse than Celie's trying times; yet she survives because she still has a soft spot for her *family*, and by that we are referring to the totality of Blacks in America. One final point about Walker's visceral masterpiece: its earthiness is exemplified in two themes that have become a major concern for Africa, namely, polygyny and religion. The Celie-Albert-Shug trio, living together in harmony under one roof, could hardly be found in any African novel of today; at least, no woman writer would dream of presenting such a positive portrait. Walker's contention seems to be that since the Black condition, posing as it does so many barriers to happiness, is based upon a culture distinct and often at variance with the western way of life, Blacks have a responsibility to shape their destiny accordingly. As for woman, she must have her freedom, while constantly bearing in mind that her enemy is history, not man.

The christian religion is another yardstick for judging Walker's openmindedness and cultural consciousness. We know the mission of the missionaries in our history, as the moral arm of the mindless machinery of colonialism. However, Nettie and the others in her group approach the Olinka, not at the christian level — a spiritual hierarchy of master and servant, of believer and pagan . . . — but at the level of human beings. Of course, colour counts; but so does the human condition. The Olinka, in their large numbers, reject christianity; still, Nettie and her family do not reject them.

Still an obsession with the obvious. In Africa today, christianity has become a forceful vector of culture. It is significant that while many sons and daughters of Africa are still wading in the baptismal waters of christian civilization, their kin across the seas are making gargantuan efforts to return home. The reason is simple: the continental African, through his experience of colonialism, has not lost all illusion of authenticity and has hardly been brutalized. On the contrary,

the African of the diaspora, in slavery, has experienced white hell. De-personalization, de-culturation, de-humanization, in essence, super-christianization, through slavery. In his poignant book on slavery, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams engages one of the saints of abolition, William Wilberforce, in an imaginary interview. The saintly crusader, responding to a question on how slavery came to be abolished, claims that it is "God's work. It signifies the triumph of His will over human selfishness. It teaches that no obstacle of interest or prejudice is irremovable, by faith and prayer. . . ." ⁵¹ Thus, Wilberforce and his fellow saints, as would their colonialist offspring of subsequent years, attached the notion of faith and piety to an achievement based upon manipulation, hypocrisy and paternalism. For, if a law (1848) has stated that the sale of human beings as cargo and beasts of prey is wrong, it does not mean that the theory is immediately transformed into reality. You do not enact laws to govern the movement of man's mind. And we know that slavery, in various guises, is still practised today. And we know that God had nothing to do with slavery or its abolition. And we know that in its most elevated form, christianity is sophisticated slavery. One only needs to read Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* ⁵² to understand the point.

Black literature of the diaspora presents several poignant images of western God and his attitudes to Blacks: Jacques Roumain, Aimé Césaire, Mayotte Capécia, Bernard Dadié, Frantz Fanon, Léon Damas, all treat the subject. We shall consider only one or two examples here. First, Damas: In his short story, "The Three Brothers," he tells us of a time when all men were black, when God the Father used to visit his three children once in a blue moon. On one of such visits, he tells his three sons that he has prepared for them a crystal-clear water that will turn them white "like all those that are by my side. For, I'll tell you what many don't know, in my eyes, it's white colour that constitutes heavenly happiness". ⁵³ The youngest rushes to the stream, bathes in it and becomes as white as snow. The next, after a moment of hesi-

tation, follows suit and turns red. The eldest, seeing the other two thus transformed, runs to the water as fast as he can only to find just very little water left, enough to wash only his palms and the sole of his feet. He is forced to keep his black skin. So he appeals to God who promises to give him another chance, only this time not at colour-change. Then he gives his three sons a choice of virtues. The Black chooses Riches; the Indian, Freedom, and the White, Intelligence. With intelligence, the white man becomes the most cunning, the strongest. He soon snatches riches away from the Black, and makes both Black and Indian his slaves.

And here is God in the imagination of a South African poet:

God the Bureau for the Safety of the State
God with a helmet on
in one hand a brief case full of shares and gold
in the other a horsewhip.⁵⁴

It is easily noticeable that, in each case, the image of God is based upon the experience of the people. Fiction feeds on fact and mind cannot exist outside matter except, of course, after death. Now, Blacks, as Damas's story proposes, are, to a certain extent, responsible for their condition in the world: we have connived with Civilization. We have been willing disciples of christian pendantism. We have refused to see the light, which lies beyond the darkness of the dark ideals imported by the colonizer.

The slave, hardened by the trauma of the Trade against the self-gratifying efforts of christian hypocrisy, has reacted violently to oppression while the colonized of Africa can afford to compromise. It is a question of particularities. No one denies that christian ideals, formulated in the sweet tongue of the sermonizer, are ideal. However, when the Black sings in church, "Wash me, Heavenly Father, And I will be as white as snow!", he must remember that the spiritual recalls the socio-cultural, and that there are certain discriminatory tendencies and earthly superiority involved. For, says the poet:

Christ today is in the house of rogues
And his arms unfold in the cathedrals the wide shadow
of the vulture
And in the vaults of the monasteries the priest is counting
the interests of the contributions
And the church-bell is spitting out death on the famished multitudes.⁵⁵

Roumain's voice is echoed by many others who have revealed the white face of christianity. Africa's children of the diaspora have seen through the pale skin of the imported religion and have snatched away its mask. Our opinion is that Africa needs to learn a lesson from her children abroad. There, after centuries of christianization, it is not christianity that plays the mobilizing, integrating role in forging a nation. Christianity, lent, borrowed, given like money and material, belongs elsewhere, to the master.

Many an African writer have also addressed the issue of religion. As Ngugi has stated in clear terms, an African "cannot escape the church and its influence."⁵⁶ The question is, do we as Africans continue to sow the seeds of a culture that has prevented our own seeds from blooming? The writers perceive the rigour and rigidity in the religion imposed upon the African and many of them see the need for a change. For, if there is no change, there will never be a true politico-cultural revolution here. It is Cheikh Anta Diop that declared:

Christianize the Blacks to the marrow, in order to make their souls docile until the day of massacre; seek thus to make them a people singing negro-spirituals in the manner of certain messianic Black Americans.⁵⁷

However, while the Black American is singing spirituals, he has his eyes firmly set on the streets, which is the real world, because he knows that he has to struggle to survive. We recently wrote a poem for David Diop in which Black reality is the theme:

spread the religion of the master race!
seek the sanctuary of Misery!
only the poor will inherit the riches of heaven!
and i'm dying of hunger
and i'm laid low by hatred
and my child's dying from the chains
and my sister's suffering from Misery
and my beastly brother's breathing the **polluted** air of
civilization

black christianized civilized colonized
vulture cooperating with
white christian civilizing colonizing
vultures.^{5,8}

Religion, in the African context, has always been a constant, whether the word is derived from *religare* (to bind together), or *religere* (to rehearse or perform carefully). A sense of community. Solidarity. Survival. Some metaphysical support is considered necessary. Another fact is that religion is inseparable from other spheres of life. That has always been true from the beginning of time and christianity cannot now change a people's most innate beliefs and attitudes. In the colonies, the complementarity between priest and public officer is natural, planned, executed. The questions are, whether or not missionaries, after realizing that exploitation, racism and inhumanism exist in society, can only disapprove of it and suffer from it; whether or not the church can extricate itself from the malady of colonialism; whether or not one can at once be a good African and a good christian.

All these questions can only be rightly answered, all our problems can only be resolved if we have a genuineness of purpose and a commitment to our culture. Some writers have suggested that christianity needs washing, "cleaning away all the dirt, leaving only the eternal."^{5,9} The problem is that such adaptation is a sort of half-way house and, in a revolution, ambiguity is a bane, not a boon. Others, like Mongo

Beti, advocate a total elimination of foreign religions (christianity is only one of them). That wish will remain so, forever, because culture is dynamic, ever changing, and those foreign religions have become a factor of our evolution. Indeed, the leaders of the land, clerical or civilian, agents of the church and mosque, continue to enumerate the positive contributions of their mentor while pockets of powerful parasites are busy pinching pennies and riding on the back of their prostituted paupers to their paper paradise. Christianity is a burden, a weight being carried confusedly. From colonialism, to independence, to neo-colonialism, from the mission to the African church, the Black man has had his body and soul enslaved. As the psalmist asks, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Still an obsession with the obvious. Religion is, today, a battlefield, not brotherhood; scourge of society, not salvation; fanaticism, not faith. And faith must not be an indiscriminate ingurgitation of ideas and icons but a positive attitude leaving room for action to ameliorate man's destiny. Culture, we insist, must be open, in order to survive and be meaningful to life. As Williams affirms: "A good living culture is various and changing." A satisfied, perfect culture is no longer a culture. It would be Utopia, and we know that does not exist in our time, only in George Orwell's 1984. Even then, the omen is scary: Utopia is an economic, social, political, cultural trap where man exists only as a social animal lacking all individuality. The telescreen is ever-present, monitoring his every move. Indeed, Big Brother has taken over. Newspeak is the language of Utopia. It is the language of a scientifically controlled society, with no nuances of meaning, no poetry, no imagination. The mind is controlled by the word. Through Newspeak, the State controls man, crushes the human spirit and even sexual activity is destroyed, making chastity the highest ideal. This is 1984, but we hope that our society will not live in a period of the fictional 1984. We hope that we shall continue to look upon the elements of our culture with a view to utilizing their positive

components to develop our society. Our own particular interest in foreign languages, we would like to assert, is a factor in such a positive effort. Foreign-language learning is not just a matter of conjugating verbs, forming sentences, learning the facts and fiction of a given country. It is understanding a culture, using the knowledge to ameliorate one's own culture, dealing with the other culture on more or less equal terms. Culture being communication, knowledge, community, we aspire to achieve such objectives in our teaching and learning. In the Department of Modern European Languages at Ife, all the staff are concerned with the totality of culture. We are making concerted efforts to build and buttress, to spread and support Knowledge. We realize that behind the apparent jocosity often lies the subtle sneer of critics that call us *foreigners*, implying that we run what are, at best, peripheral programmes, that we are alienated. However, we know that the truth is otherwise, that our programmes — an appetizer of German, a mixed grill of French and Portuguese, and, coming up soon, a dessert of Italian — are primary to the promotion and implementation of those ideals upon which this great institution has been built, "For Learning and Culture". It is true that language, foreign language, can and does breed alienation. But it depends. Our effort is that these languages are not to be used as vehicles of superordination, but as a means of understanding the world, which includes peoples that have colour and cultural affinities with us. Besides, let us remember that the best way to know our enemies is to learn their language. We have also affirmed that science and the arts are both aspects of culture; knowledge of foreign languages will therefore also aid culture, not conceived of as a received state, but as continuing process, "a constitutive social process, creating specific and different ways of life."⁶⁰ In order to achieve the objectives to which, we hope, our society is aspiring, we recommend that French, the language most immediate to our needs, should be made compulsory in all secondary schools in this country, and that all students of this great

university should be made to take a French course before graduating.

For our part, our study of literature has aroused in us a desire to contribute our quota to the long, winding process of the de-colonization of the Black man. It all dates back to our days in the winter of white civilization, a dark speck in a sea of white. From the experience and from our education, we have confirmed that while colour is ideally an accident, it has, until now, been an Absolute. It is all part of our oppression. "Life for an oppressed person is one long protracted agonizing compromise."⁶¹ We have compromised our life for too long. Up till now, the interpreters of the dream, the bourgeois, have failed us woefully. If we decide to continue to follow them — or, at this stage, if the masses decide to follow us — we have to start to live, not lie; be serious, not sentimental and stupid; be Black peoples' leaders, not white philanthropists' larkeys; be patriots, not prostitutes and pimps; be participants, not parasites; be committed, not corrupted. We must turn our negatives into positives, re-discover paradigms that best exemplify our cultures. We must bury the outdated metaphors created by the White master. Black is *not* ugly, indolent, hate-filled, ignorant, lustful for White flesh, backward. . . . Black is beautiful, hard-working, loving, intelligent, progressive, viable, assertive, creative. . . . But Black cannot love when he is a slave.

Our elevation to the position of professor in October 1980 has not made us stop our intellectual journey through the world of literatures, French and Francophone, white and black, but particularly black. We are proud of our contribution, but humbly affirm that there are still many rivers to cross, many mountains to climb. Here at home, we have seen culture dumped in the dustbin by transferred technology. Elsewhere, culture is in other arenas of crisis. The need is there, more than ever before, to re-affirm our culture, active not archaic, dynamic not dead, daring, not dogmatic. Ezekiel Mphahlele's call still rings sonorously in our ears:

What do we want from one another, we blacks of the world? Is it something that can only really be felt at the individual-subjective level? Can we really find it in pan-negro congresses? Is it necessary that we should be closer than we can get through the usual channels of student and teacher exchange, of mass media, of technological and economic cooperation or aid? Before we can answer these questions, we shall have to know each other better. Africa knows very little about its diaspora.⁶²

Notes and References

All translations into English have been done by us.

Such were the words of many a messiah of the master-race in colonial Africa. Interestingly enough, they are not unheard of even today, in neo-colonial Africa.

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