

DISTANT ECHOES OF PAN AFRICAN¹ IDENTITY: THE DISCORDANT RESONANCE OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE AND AMBIVALENCE OF IDENTITY IN A DIASPORAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

It has been indicated that cultural resistance is an essential element in the historical effort to create a world which satisfies the "needs and powers of men", with its goal being "emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer 1972). In this respect, this paper explores the seminal cultural resistance, which, although inherent in eighteenth century literature, festivals and folk tales emanating from the African Diaspora, has flowed with concomitant currents of ambivalence of identity and an often embarrassing enmeshment with Western philosophical traditions, which veil the vital Pan African essence of early African Diasporan literary, artistic and cultural endeavours (Henry 2000; Hanna 2011).

The eighteenth century was an era driven by the enslavement of African people and colonial expansion by European imperial powers. The culture shock of physical bondage and the often brutal harsh regimented conditions of enslavement created a universe in which resistance took a variety of forms, many of which were veiled in the limited creative space afforded by slave masters and Western academia.

The dehumanizing experience of enslavement during this era was also characterized by slave societies in which enslaved Africans were forbidden to speak their own languages or to openly worship their ancient deities. This oppressed and restricted reality also ensured an ambivalence of identity and a fractured sense of 'being'. It is within this contradictory contextual frame of reference that we explore the techniques of cultural resistance and the struggle for emancipation, which laid the foundations of Pan African identity.

The apparent paradox and ambivalence of eighteenth century African Diasporan resistance cloaked in Western philosophical discourse confirms the conclusion that neither culture itself or the regimes of power that are "imbricated in cultural logics and experiences" can ever be wholly consistent or totally determining (Dirks et. al. 1994:18). In this regard, it is asserted that identities may be seen as variably successful attempts to create and maintain coherence out of "inconsistent cultural stuff" and "inconsistent life experience" but that every actor always carries around enough disparate and contradictory strands of knowledge and passion so as always to be in a potentially critical position (ibid.).

In this paper we critically examine the phenomenon of ambivalent and fractured identities which, paradoxically, provided a foundation for the African Diaspora's creation and maintenance of a coherent identity linked to their African roots in the eighteenth century which ultimately incubated and gave birth to the modern Pan African movement. Of necessity, we engage parallel streams of race, class and gender which flowed inextricably throughout the eighteenth century and were crucial in the revolutionary process of Pan African identity formation.

1 In this paper the term "Pan African" has two meanings. In the first instance, it refers to the collective resistance of Black populations from the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe against Western slavery, imperialism, colonization and racism from the 1770's to the present time (Stuckey 1987; 1994; M'Baye 2011:9). The second meaning is the diffusion of African survivals (known as *Africanisms*) in different parts of the world, such as the spread of African cultural values, customs and ideologies into the Black Diaspora since slavery (Levin 2003; M'Baye 2011:9).

Salaam in Afrikadesta

In the context of the colonial and slave realities of Africans at home and abroad during the era of the 18th century, it is fortuitous that we are having this discourse in the ancient precincts of Oxford University, given that one of its famous alumni was one William Penn², who converted to Puritanism from mainstream Church of England religious doctrine and to whom a grant of letters patent was made of extensive North American colonies, including Pennsylvania, the so called *Quaker State* (Garrantry and Carnes (eds.) 1999; Osgood 2010) some 30 years after a proprietary grant had been made to then Attorney General, Sir Robert Heath, of the Carolinas, which included the Bahamas Islands, the archipelago where Cristobal Colon, aka Christopher Columbus is reputed to have first made landfall in his momentous so called voyage of discovery which set into motion the historical train of colonial events punctuated by the kidnappings and forced enslavements of millions of Africans and which helped to create the underlying cultural, economic, social and political fabric of the 18th century (Craton 1983; Craton and Saunders 1992; Hanna 2011).

Stuart Hall asserts that the post-colonial experience prepared the colonized to live in a postmodern Diasporan relationship to identity and that, paradigmatically, it is a "diasporic" experience (Hall 1996:490). In this frame of reference, cultural research agendas must have at their epicenter an awareness of the lived Diasporic experience of ordinary, everyday people and of the complex and multifaceted interaction of race and other social phenomena and consequent hybridization, which often conceals the inner dynamics of social interaction utilized in myth creation (Hanna 2011:218). In this regard, Avtar Brah argues that experience is best understood as the mediated process of making sense of the world symbolically and narratively (Brah 2007).

In explaining the complex matrix of symbols surrounding the concept of identity in an African Diasporic context, it is critical and essential to consider the contention that, from the Afro-Caribbean perspective, philosophy is an inter-textually embedded discursive practice and not an isolated or absolutely autonomous one (Henry 2000:2; Hanna 2011:218). Henry asserts that the formation and current structures reflect imperial history of the cultural system which was housed in the larger discursive field of Caribbean society (Henry 2000:3). He further points out that the history of discursive violence in the Caribbean has produced high levels of mutual de-centering and inter-culturation between the African and European worlds, the European and Indian worlds and the Indian and African worlds and that this violence has left parts of these systems fairly intact, other parts highly mixed and others that are damaged beyond repair, which is the heritage upon which creative totalizations must build, with these imploded foundations having led to superficial comparisons with post-modern thought that can be misleading (Henry 2000:15).

In this context, it is important to bear in mind Paget Henry's indication that the impact of colonization had at least three important consequences for Pan African discourse, with the

2 University of Oxford <http://www.ox.ac.UK/about_the_university/oxford_people/famousoxonians/>

first being the devaluation and negation of the "truth claims" of Europeans and European educated Africans, on assumptions of White superiority. Secondly, their hybridization, as they absorbed European contents and adopted European languages, as a medium of expression and thirdly, in addition to Arabic languages, African discourses, which were primarily oral, developed writing capabilities in European languages (Henry 2000:44). The Eurocentric educational mindset has created contradictions and ambiguities in Caribbean Pan African scholarship, with Western historicism being one of the most important generative ontological constructs of modern Caribbean thought (Henry 2000:48).

Paget Henry concludes that, from early African literary efforts of the 18th century, the writings of the African elite, such as Ottobah Cugoano, Anton Amo, Olaudah Equiano, Africanus Horton, Bishop Crowther, James Johnson, Edward Blyden, Kitoj Ajasu and Joseph Casley-Crawford, have all been exposed to European education and absorbed many of its biases, with it only being in the post-colonial period that these "clouds of invisibility" have begun to disperse, allowing traditional African philosophy to emerge (Henry 2000:44). Henry declares that contradictory ambivalences result from the hybrid nature of colonial languages and other signifying systems and that the persistence of Euro-centric values and meanings in the thinking of Pan African philosophers reflect "embarrassing traces" that limit the effectiveness of their critiques (ibid.).

In this Pan African mindset, Henry contends that the traditional, pre-modern, African, with his national Yoruba, Baluba, Akan, Igbo and other African traditional concepts of self and identity are subsumed in the idea of "the negro" and placed at the base of European conceptualization of humanity, inherently inferior and essential to the formation of European and Western identities (Henry 2000:55). In this respect, in seeking the inner core of *traditional Africa*, it is imperative that we deconstruct the Western fiction and begin to see the essence of identity and "being", as well as creative activities of African deities (Henry 2000:55; Hanna 2011:222). Wole Soyinka's analysis of this pre-modern, traditional African paradigm demonstrates that most African ontologies are premised on four basic stages or areas of existence, namely the world of the ancestors, the living, the unborn and the "creative womb or matrix of original forms and energies" (Wole Soyinka 1990:140-160).

In this frame of reference, Fashina has asserted the need for the carving of a distinct critical canon for the reading of Black/African literature (Fashina 2008:60). He points out that African names of humans, flora, fauna and objects as used in African literary and cultural discourses are ritualistic and historical, carrying the same sacred meanings (ibid.). This consciousness of the imperative of creating a code for African cultural interpretation was the foundation for the first *International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists* in Paris in 1956, with intrinsic exploration of the *Crisis in Negro Culture* (Fashina 2008:61). Nelson Fashina points out that subsequent conferences and congresses³ of African American writers and critics have examined the negative impact of writing or book culture (literary theory and interpretation)

3 C/f Fashina's critique of Copans' 1999 IFRA Lecture which questioned the authenticity of *African Studies* (Cited in Fashina 2008).

on the drive for a Black *critical aesthetics* (Fashina 1997:11; 2008:61)⁴.

It has been indicated that several cultural genetic factors foreground this sense of nationalism and Pan Africanist consciousness, primarily the need to create a theory of *Africanism and Blackness* which is “distilled from the homogeneous pattern of emotive and mythical interpretations” of values in contrast to the “European induced images and conceptions of our universe”, which is an organic aspect of African imagination and the symbiotic aspect of *African collective consciousness* (Irele 1990:54; Fashina 1994:73; 2008:61). Fashina argues that, quite against this strive for “*African nationalist consciousness* in culture and literary studies is the “European standard interpretation” of African studies as more a “mental construct” rather than a “researchable quality” (Fashina 2008:61). Fashina declares one needs to remind the proponents of this “absence theory of Africa and African epistemology” that criticism theory and dialogical reasoning and philosophy are not alien to African culture and traditions. He points out that the pages of history are replete with records that court historians and poets did exist in the palaces of African monarchs, kings and emperors of the early African empires before the invasion of the continent by Western colonial imperial forces in the 18th century.

These historians and poets were court officials and although not invested with official designation by university tradition as research fellows and scholars, they nevertheless performed such roles and functions in their relative conditions, age and time as researchers in history, ethnography and culture, becoming ultimately the unacknowledged sociologists and anthropologists of the African spatial dimensions of their time and the “pedigree” of their records and informal archives have formed part of the “data sites” collected by early European historiographers, ethnographers and social researchers, whose works form the “templates for today’s modern interpretations”. This provides fertile ground for the assertion that, regardless of whether the European social science establishment was the “biological parent or midwife” that took delivery of the now “orphaned *African studies*”, the fact remains undeniable that there had been a form of informal study about Africa and its culture, even though in “unsophisticated scale”, before the “invention of the now canonized term *African Studies*” (Fashina 2008:61)⁵.

In this respect, it is essential to consider that the homogenization of African cultures is detrimental because it “overlooks the multifarious African civilizations” from which specific African Diasporan writers came or evolved (M’Baye 2011:6-7). As asserted by Colin Palmer, we need to emphasize the difference between African cultures by recognizing that these people who resided on the African continent defined themselves solely in accordance with their ethnic groups (Campbell 2000:56-59). This underscores the specification and importance of social relational and cultural perspectives in understanding the basic conditions under which the migration of enslaved Africans occurred (Mintz and Price 1976).

In this contextual framework, in which African names and objects are interpreted in their

4 C/f Diop 1974; Gates 1984; Henry 2000; Hanna 2011

5 C/f Diop 1974; Achebe 1988

sacred contexts, their implications and transformations from one space to another and their semantic, semiotic and cultural configurations can only be understood fully by the sharers or stakeholders in the culture (Abram 1997:14; Fashina 2008:69). This engages a necessity to "re-inscribe" the continent of Africa into the history of the Black Diaspora and requires writing Africa into the global history of Pan African resistance and tracing this history to early literature and cultures of the Black Diaspora. This helps us to see and acknowledge the subtle tactics that enslaved Africans invented from the belly of the slave ships of the *Middle Passage* in order to resist European oppression and reconnect with Africa⁶ (M'Baye 2011:6). M'Baye emphasizes the need to examine the conditions early Black writers experienced during the middle passage or after their arrival in the New World and to explore the specific cultural contexts and social relationships that influenced their works and lives during the 18th century. He indicates that this approach to literature consists of letting the texts talk in order to reveal the rich syncretism of African and European cultural elements that permeate them.

This de-homogenization of Africa helps us to examine the exact African societies whose folklore, myths, religions and world views permeate early Black Diasporan writings (M'Baye 2011:7). M'Baye concludes that, by exploring these specific African retentions, one can see how the pioneers of Black Atlantic literature blended their African identities with their Western traditions to achieve admissibility and social and economic status in a new world in which Europeans had equated the adjective *African* with inferiority and inhumanity. Hence, the *Black Atlantic* literature should be interpreted through an African centered method that validates the importance of these multiple identities, positions and ideas that early Black writers developed in particular moments of their lives to strengthen or weaken their Pan African consciousness (ibid.).

This begins with an acknowledgment of the distinct African cultures from which the authors came and a validation that the contributions of the first Black women writers made in the development of Pan Africanism (ibid.). Amy Levin emphasizes the need to combine methods of cultural anthropology, literary criticism and intellectual history, which serve as metaphors of cultural and social resistance of women in the Black Diaspora (Levin 2003).

However, Paul Gilroy has advanced the term *Black Atlantic* to describe what he views as the "ambivalent representation of race and nationalism" in the writings of early American and British writers and intellectuals. In this respect, he theorizes Africa in terms of dualities to reveal the diversity of modern Black cultures (Gilroy 1993). However, M'Baye points out that, although it broadens our understanding of relations between Africa and the Diaspora, Gilroy's theory is open to serious critique because it over emphasizes the anti-essentialism, hybridity, individuality and ambivalence of early Black writers of the Diaspora towards Africa. In this regard, Gilroy's vision of Black cultures as fragmented overlooks the complex ways in which Black writers of the Diaspora have consistently perceived Africa in Pan Africanist terms despite their fluctuating relations towards Africa. This rigid theory of hybridity excludes Africa from the experiences of Black people in the Diaspora (M'Baye 2011:11).

⁶ "Pan African resistance began in the belly of the whale from which the *sons and daughters of Africa* were dispersed all over the New World, occupying every conceivable task" (Gomez 2005). C/f Gomez 1998

Gilroy has contended that the works of Wheatley and Equiano should be valued only as a means to observe the durability of African elements in the Diaspora or dismissed as an inadequate mixture, doomed always to be something less than the supposed pure entities that first contributed to produce it. Their legacy is most valuable as a mix or hybrid, with its recombinant form being indebted to its present cultures but remaining “assertively and insubordinately a *bastard*” (Gilroy 2000). Gilroy also argues that neither Equiano nor Wheatley ever returned to the African homelands from which their long journey through slavery had begun and that Wheatley's poetry reflects her personal transformation from African to American (ibid.).

M'Baye points out that, by representing Equiano's and Wheatley's relations to Africa as an irreversible disconnection from the continent and total conversion into American cultures, Gilroy's theory of hybridity assumes that this process of cultural and social mixing occurs only in the Black Diaspora, as if the African continent from which the enslaved Black people came was and continues to be a single homogenous and pure entity (M'Baye 2011: 11). Gilroy neglects how these writers bridged their physical distance from their homeland and attenuated their self alteration through frequent appropriation of African identities (ibid.).

This process of *self navigation* reveals the spiritual significance of Africa for 18th century Black Americans such as Wheatley and Equiano (Baker 1980). This constant attachment or spiritual journey to Africa produces a “double nomenclature” or the act of being caught between two worlds⁷ (ibid.). In this *self navigation*, on the one hand, they were not free to be Africans, finding that their traditional rituals and the instruments necessary for their performance suppressed by White society. On the other hand, they were defined by law as outsiders and were excluded from the free, human, community that the Puritans designated as the *City of God in the New World* (Baker 1980; M'Baye 2011:12-13). In mapping this *self navigation*, the transportation of African oral narratives permits us to make inter-textual and comparative analysis between these tales and the narratives of African American slaves⁸ (M'Baye 2011: 12-13).

In this respect, it is essential to consider that engaging 18th century African scholarship in the context of modern Pan African political theory poses problematic enigmas, which must be placed under the microscope of subtext analysis (M'Baye 2009). As indicated by Anthony Bogues, early Black slave narratives reflect *discursive practices* of slave criticism and critique that produced alternative meanings of racial slavery, natural liberty and natural rights and countered the dominant 18th century ideas of racial plantation slavery. He points out that, as documents of slave political criticism and critique, the narratives have a great deal to tell us about 18th century social and political ideas and form a central part of an *Africana* radical intellectual political tradition (Bogues 2003).⁹

7 C/f DuBois 1903

8 C/f Herkovits 1936; 1941

9 C/f Pierson 1993; Berlin 2003

In this context, Babacar M'Baye profoundly asserts that 18th century Black Diasporan writers such as Phillis Wheatley, Quobna Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano were pioneer writers of the Black Diaspora who identified with Africa and developed sustained criticism against slavery, racism and other forms of oppression against Black people in the New World and Africa. In their works, they made strong Pan Africanist and other nationalist references that allowed them to offset the occasional ambivalence that they expressed towards Africa. The Black Diasporan writers were part of a small elite group of Western educated Black intellectuals whose views on Africa did not represent those of all other Black populations in the West (M'Baye 2009). As indicated by M'Baye, they received education and eventually acquired freedom, experiences and opportunities which were not available to Black people in the United States and the Caribbean. Yet they utilized their elite status and individuality by attacking Western slavery and linking their suffering to that of Black people in Africa and in the African Diaspora, thereby becoming "pioneers of Pan Africanism". Recognizing this subversive quality of Black Diasporan authors requires us to interpret their writings of Pan African and radical texts that grappled with the racial, ideological and political realities of Western slavery and imperialism on the Black world (M'Baye 2011:3).

As Chapman advises, the slaves created a rich oral literature in their new tongue and a distinct culture to sustain themselves intellectually and spiritually and gave expression to the "man in the slave" in opposition to the dehumanizing conditions of slavery. Slaves could gather together only for religious worship and beyond the expression of strictly controlled permissible religious sentiments, spirituals provided the imagery and a veiled structure for the utterance of hidden uncontrollable freedom aspirations. The legal status of slaves was as property but unlike other stolen property, slaves refused to remain stolen (Chapman 1971:xiv). Similarly, M'Baye indicates that, by comparing Black Diasporan narratives, one can identify trickster figures and resistance traditions that are similar to those that permeated the cultures of both enslaved and free Black Diasporan people. Such comparison of Black Atlantic narratives reveal the relationship between the history of the Black Diaspora and Africa (M'Baye 2011:16). In this regard, a strong influence of African cultures and Pan Africanist spirit of resistance can be identified in the writings of Wheatley, Cugoano and Equiano and their inter-weaving of history and literary analysis tends to demonstrate the Pan African dimensions of their works (M'Baye 2011:19).

More critically, it has been asserted that the concept of *African Womanism* urges critics to study the experiences of Black women, living within European societies, within African paradigms (Dove 1998:515). This African centered feminism emphasizes the boundaries confronting Black women who resist race, class and gender based oppressions (Davies and Fido 1990; John 2001; Hoving 2003). In this respect, M'Baye indicates that, in her poetry, Wheatley developed her own form of *Black Womanism* by using the verbal skills of *Black Griottes* and traditional African tricksters such as Ananci, who could assume either the form of a spider or alternative male or female human forms, in order to negotiate her freedom within an 18th century New England culture in which Puritanism and Methodism were predominant¹⁰

10 *Griotte* is the feminine equivalent of the term *Griot*, which is a term for traditional African historian, lyricist, story teller, diviner, adviser and healer (M'Baye 2011:24). C/f Hale 1998

(M'Baye 2011:24). M'Baye suggests that identifying Wheatley as a *Griotte* suggests the major role that this pioneer Black writer from Senegal had on Pan African Literature that praised Puritan and Methodist Christianity and American patriotism in order to achieve freedom for enslaved Africans, confirming Robinson's optimistic statement that exhaustive research will one day reveal Phillis Wheatley as a cleverly disguised, badly misunderstood, militantly assertive Black woman (Robinson 1975:30; M'Baye 2011:24).

Abraham Chapman declares, the slave narratives created a new image in American literature: the slave as hero. Some of the reactions to the publication of the slave narratives reflect the first conscious awareness of this new type of hero in American literature (Chapman 1971:xviii). Similarly, Dean has asserted that slave songs and poems, music, stories and religion played a significant role in slave culture, with it being through these modes of expression that slaves were able to imprint their existence, leaving symbolic representations of their African history in the New World (Dean 1995:11). The embodiment of African musical traditions into Bahamian cultures symbolized the strength of Black slaves to preserve their heritage and identity in West African culture (Bethel 1991).

We are reminded by Grace Turner that displaced Africans could draw on cultural references to create appropriate personal perceptions for themselves as well as their children. This would allow an alternate reference point for understanding their values as individuals, regardless of their legal and social circumstances. Enslaved Africans, living under difficult daily conditions, were thus assured the promise of a better after life (Turner 2007:30). In our analysis of 18th century Black Diasporan literature, we must, of necessity, adopt these alternate reference points and terms of analysis which offer fidelity to these realities and this demands a radical reassessment of the Black Diasporan literature of the 18th century through the lens of African context and contemporary social historical realities. This contextual framework leads to inescapable links between these Black writers and the seminal and foundational dimensions of Pan African thought and scholarship and provides new insight into this significant body of 18th century literature and scholarship and into modern Pan African theory.

As poignantly asserted by Peter Abrahams, if the men inaugurating the new ways have the sense and the patience to preserve the finer qualities of the old ways and fuse these with the new, then we can expect something magnificently new from Africa (Abrahams 1960:75). This confirms Tom M'Boya's declaration that the African desires to be understood from the viewpoint of his or her own people. Africa must now assert its own personality and speak for itself (M'Boya 1960:30).

Free the Land!
A Luta Continua!

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