



“WHAT IS AFRICA TO ME?”: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE AFRICA POEMS OF DAVID DIOP, COUNTEE CULLEN AND ABIOSEH NICOL

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“Distinctively Black poetry adheres to certain, identifiable values – political and aesthetic – that are open to adoption, enjoyment by anyone.” (Jordan 50)

“The gift of poetry [...] is a sacred thing. It should never be misused. Only when the poet’s heart is in what he says should he create poetry.” (Woodruff 220)

ABSTRACT

Africa has been a topic for African-Americans and African poets respectively in the 1920’s and the 1930’s in America and France. The point was to reaffirm the African personality that was downplayed by the colonial and slave masters in the two spaces. Thus, with the Harlem Renaissance, Black poets reasserted themselves just like the poets of the Négritude in Paris. Thus, Countee Cullen, David Diop and Davidson Nicol all address Africa in their poems although with different approaches and meanings. From a comparatist perspective and using identity politics, this contribution seeks to overview the meaning of Africa in the poems of three major poets of African descent, and to show particularly that the African-American poet here seems to espouse the colonialist and Western humanist and Manichean way of seeing Africa.

Key words: Diop, Cullen, Nicol, Africa, US, poetry, meaning, culture, civilization

RESUME

L’Afrique a été un sujet favori des poètes afro-américains et africains des années 1920 aux États-Unis et 1930 en France. Il s’agissait pour ces poètes de réaffirmer leur identité africaine afin de nullifier les discours racistes qui relèguent le Noir à une position inférieure, donc une sous-personne. Ces projets sont ceux portés par les mouvements comme le Harlem Renaissance et la Négritude. Ainsi, Countee Cullen, David Diop et Davidson Nicol accordent une place de choix à l’Afrique dans leurs œuvres l’Afrique, mais avec des approches et des entendements différents. Cette étude analyse la signification de l’Afrique chez ces trois auteurs d’origine africaine. Plus important, elle montre spécialement que le rapport de l’Afro-Américain à l’Afrique est plutôt ambivalent et exprime souvent l’idéologie colonialiste, humaniste et manichéenne que combattent Diop et Nicol.

Mots clés : Diop, Cullen, Nicol, Afrique, États-Unis, poésie, signification, culture civilisation

INTRODUCTION

This contribution seeks to overview the meaning of Africa in the poems of three major poets of African descent. They are French-born David Diop of Senegalese background, the British-educated Sierra Leonian, Abioseh Nicol, and Harlem Renaissance's Countee Cullen in the United States of America. David Diop published a collection of poems, *Coups de Pilon* which is inclusive of the outstanding poem titled "Afrique" (Africa). The poem had a resounding effect both in Africa, whether Francophone or Anglophone, and in the United States. As a matter of fact, the poem was translated into US English by an African-American female poet, Lucille Clifton in 1974. The second poem is authored by Davidson Sylvester Hector Willoughby Nicol and comes under the title "The Africa that Lies Within US" and also referred to as "The Meaning of Africa." The third work is "Heritage" by Countee Cullen, it was published in the thick of the Black Renaissance movement in the United States where people of African descent brought into slavery were freed into a society not ready to accept them on the ground that they were unfit to be called human beings, thereby inappropriate for the White establishment to integrate in the US.

As can be noticed, the three poems revolve around the theme of "What is Africa to Me?" In others words, each poet has a connection to Africa, a relationship of love, among others. Still, the thread of commonality among these three poems is the expression of a belonging, of an assaulted and dislocated sense of identity. Though the common denominator here is Africa, these three African authors have diverging relationships with the Motherland. While Davidson Nicol and David Diop (re-)appropriate Africa as a homeland to come back to both physically and spiritually, the people of African descent in the Diaspora see Africa, more often than not, with a sense ambivalence, or aloofness, and a love-hate feeling of connection and belonging. This is clearly conflict-ridden. These commonalities and conflictualities are the basis of comparatist approach looking at the linkages made of analogy, parentage, and influences that works of different background may share. More importantly, this study builds on identity politics such as used or seen in Afrocentric and Western-influenced scholarship and fiction in Africa and of African descent.

1. Africa and the Americas

1.1. Interconnections

In this work, Africa is understood as the continent where Black people live. The continent is also home to people who only use continental demonyms to refer to themselves. The Moroccan, Egyptian, Algerian, etc. oppose themselves to Africans who have a darker skin tone. Thus, Jahn Janheinz's definition comes right to the point when it has it that "'Africa' [...] means Africa south of the Sahara, 'Black Africa' and the inhabitants of the region are referred to as Africans – the people 'in the bush' as well as the intellectuals" (Janheinz 19).

If Africa has been a point of marvel and courtesy on the part of outsiders who rushed in to "violate", her plundering her resources, the continent has also been a point of marvel to her sons and daughters both at home and abroad. African poets always found resources in Africa to take pride with. This has also been the case with the children of Africa snatched from the Motherland through Arab and Transatlantic slave trade. This manifestation of attachment to the Motherland is best shown in the African Diaspora. Thus, in the 1920's creative expressivity was used by African-Americans to affirm themselves in terms of identity, and to claim for more inclusion or integration in the country they truly knew as theirs. Efforts by the African slaves (Nat Turner et al), the integrationist movement started by people like Booker T. Washington and more conceptualized by W.E. B. DuBois, contributed to making and buttressing the claim that the US was also home to Blacks because they were yanked from their initial homes and planted forcefully in a new place that they bore on their back. Yet, the US only showed discrimination and hate, to say the least, to those who helped build the country when Christopher Columbus purportedly discovered the Americas. To be or not to be is a sort of question here. While Africa let go of some of her children, which action left a great number of them psychologically emaciated and disoriented, they longed to belong. The point of anchoring has been Africa. Yet, longing for a home has been somewhat hard to express. A sort of love-hate relationship seems to have existed among the African-American and Africa. There is a line that is usually flaunted at Africans in the US: "You sold us!" This is both problematic and evocative of a state of begrudging mind among Blacks in the US with regard to a place, though aloof and yet ostensibly (at least from how they relate to the Old Continent) their own as much as any other person with African pedigree.

In the history of former French West Africa, indigenous Africans sent to the French Metropole to become more "Frenchized" than the French themselves. In the process known as assimilation – a colonial and imperial method consisting in teaching the native children that their culture and history were worth nothing and that they had to embrace a higher and worthwhile civilization– the Western educated colonized subjects sought, through literature and arts, to reverse the table of laws. Reversal of

the table was effectuated through redefining/re-representing themselves in the collective French imaginary as well as consolidating the spirit of authentic belonging among the trampled Africans in Africa by the French colonizer. Among those of the Anglophone space, the reality is no less different. Though in the British colonies of Africa some leverage was allocated to the colonial subjects with regard to their culture and the management thereof, the condescending look of the colonial master was more than present. Both the British and French subjects were considered as savages to be cultured into Western purported high civilization. In a nutshell, the imaginary of the educated and uneducated Africans, both on the continent and in the Diaspora, was riddled with the preconceived opinions catered to them by the colonizer and the slave-master. What Africa meant to them at this point was then the biggest question to answer.

1.2. The Contexts of the "Africa" Texts

David Diop was born to a Senegalese father and a Cameroonian mother in France. In a similar situation, there is a possibility of shared and/or split allegiance on the part of the person concerned. Either when the child grows up, he/she seeks to belong to the people and the culture he/she was born into, or he/she will belong to the people he/she calls his/her own. Visibly, Diop chooses the parents' side (Africa) over France where he was born, and decided to express his deep attachment to the African continent that he had not trodden before penning his seminal poem. That Diop authors a poem dealing with Africa around the 1920's and the 1930's is indicative of the vibes and spur of the age in which he was living. In fact, students from the African continent were organizing in unions and associations along racial lines to ask for recognition within the society whose people reduced those students' far-flung homeland.

Diop's poem is written in 1930. The gist of the poem is that Africa has suffered in the hands of the Western European nations like France and England. Despite Africa being oppressed, the homeland of Diop seems to be what it was in the yesteryears: a place of calmness and glamour. This Africa opposes the representations of the West. Speaking about how Africa is represented in the imaginary of non-Africans in Europe, the late Chinua Achebe has this to write "Quite simply it is the desire-one might indeed say the need in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest". (Achebe 1978: 2)

This representation of African is well entrenched in the colonialist literature and discourse inclusive of such works as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*¹ and even the collected stories of some Africanists (*Muntu* by Jaheinz Jahn) who intended to explain Africa only to end up doing what they sought to decry: either glamourizing/exoticizing the African continent or infantilizing the people of Africa placed in a situation of permanent assistance to be catered to by Westerners.²

The task perceived and undertaken by the African Western educated of the early days –even though some have been accused of being hollowed out by Western education–had to be seen in and as attempts by them to speak for themselves. In brief, they were speaking back to the emporium at the source of their mental and psychological state. Speaking of Diop's connection with Africa, France is namely pointed at as being a country that initiated "assimilation"³ the acculturation process whereby many Africans were taught into believing in the nothingness of their culture, personality and identity. This can be clearly observed in the literary productions of former colonized subjects of the French. In fact, when one checks out the works of Senghor, Césaire, Damas, and those that came after these pioneers, one only realizes that the linguistic register is of high caliber and *recherché*.

It is reported that Senghor once said: "I teach French to the French people in France." Whether true or not, such a statement speaks to the degree of perfection the subject sought to show to the colonizer, but also the degree of their uprootedness. Beneath the movement from which Diop springs, the Negritude, must be perceived the thrust toward crystallization of a sense of return/recourse to an imagined and actual home. Evocation of such a home is, at the same time, that of a sense of identity in a world

¹ About Conrad, Achebe has this to say: "The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (Achebe 1978: 8-9)

² The contrast between the African and the Western is well-captivated by Jahn Janheinz who writes, "Only the most highly cultivated person, humane, cosmopolitan, enlightened, progressive, counts as 'real european'. A 'real African' [,,] lives in the bush, carves 'primitive' sculptures, can neither read nor write, goes naked, lives carefree and happy from day to day and tells fairy stories about the crocodile and the elephant" (Janheinz 20). Achebe observes the same Western approach to Africa in New York. About it he writes saying that "The young fellow from Yonkers, perhaps partly on account of his age but I believe also for much deeper and more serious reasons, is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things" (Achebe, 1978: 2).

³ Assimilation is defined as in the following terms by Egudu: "'Assimilation' is a term used to describe the French colonial policy in Africa. The policy was aimed at turning Africans into 'Frenchmen' through the process of education. The French educational policy in Africa was therefore meant to make the Africans culturally French"(Egudu 30).

where such a sense is disembodied and ridiculed. All know how slavery (for the century-old Diasporan Africans in the Americas and colonialism (for Africans on the African continent), contributed to (re-)shape the sense of self in people of African descent. This is the meaning of “negritude” which Suzanne Valenti better captures in English in the following lines:

Negritude refers to a special set of qualities, values, thoughts, and emotions possessed by blacks. It is a movement of ideas; an ideology; a motif in literature, particularly poetry, created by black writers. It represents an attempt to erect a new man, a new black man in a white world. Negritude is a literary response by educated blacks to enslavement, oppression, rejection and marginality. (Valenti 390)

Most African artists/ writers, like David Diop all the way to the founders of Negritude, owe their source of inspiration to the Black predicament of the above-mentioned two critically important moments of the African predicament in Africa and in the Diaspora. This is likewise what can be read from Alain Locke’s reflection of the “New Negro”. Like the Negritude poets, the Harlem Renaissance artists sought to inspire, move and goad the Black masses into action like retrieving themselves from the dustbin of US collective garbage bin and mean something both to themselves and to the other components of the American society. One then understands why, speaking of the New Negro epitomized by the literary and cultural movement of Harlem, has to say that if “Harlem [...] isn't typical [...] it is significant, it is prophetic” (Locke 24) In fact, the movement, through handling a sound intellectual tradition which set out to think about the very essence of blackness in the belly of the Americas or the US, succeeded in creating a “New Negro”, one that is intelligent. Thus, Locke writes, “The intelligent Negro of today is resolved not to make discrimination an extenuation for his shortcomings in performance, individual or collective; he is trying to hold himself at par, neither inflated by sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social discounts. For this he must know himself and be known for precisely what he is, and for that reason he welcomes the new scientific rather than the old sentimental interest” (Locke 25).⁴

The same “revolutionary” thrust is couched in poetic lines by Negritude pioneer, Aimé Césaire who writes,

My negritude is not a rock, its deafness
hurled against the clamour of the day
My negritude is not a film of dead water

⁴ Later on, Locke will add that “Therefore the Negro today wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not. He resents being spoken of as a social ward or minor, even by his own, and to being regarded a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy” (Locke 25).

on the dead eye of the earth
 My negritude is neither a tower nor a
 cathedral,
 It plunges into the burning flesh of the earth
 It plunges into the burning flesh of the sky
 It pierces the opaque prostration
 by its upright patience. (Césaire quoted in Legum 19)⁵

Just as those writers of the Harlem Renaissance in America appropriated the (spoken) word, *prise de la parole* (seizing the word) as per the African French/Francophone parlance, so too the African students in Paris sought to make their voice heard by those Whites in the imperium (French and British, for that matter). The people of the empire (both common people and educated, with the exception of a few enlightened like Jean-Paul Sartre, the prefacer of Frantz Fanon's seminal study on the poor and oppressed of Africa) all believed that Black people had no soul, no history and no way to relate to the world with their intelligence and language. Speaking French, and using it for political and ideological purposes, got the detractors of the colonized (Francophone) Africans wrong. The political independence of the former colonies is to be credited to the grueling efforts of conscientization and the fruits thereof by the educated. They had the colonizer's language. As Frantz Fanon aptly put, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. [...] Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (Fanon, 2008: 8-9).⁶ If this seizing of the word understandably ensues from the natural necessity of freeing oneself from the imperial strictures imposed by imperial Europe on Africa, it is also due to some examples already set by Blacks in America, suffering from similar predicaments. Blacks in America arguably imprinted their *modus operandi* on Africans in Paris. No wonder, Ibrahima Baba Kaké would write that "Les idées nationalistes et panafricaines lancées en Amérique dès la fin du XIX^e siècle seront [...] très vite assimilées par un petit cercle d'intellectuels africains résidant à Paris dont

⁵ Aimé Césaire is quoted here by Colin Legum in his book, *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide*, 1962, p. 19. There is a prosaic rendition of the same ideas contained in the poem here: "To set our own and effective revolution, we had first to put off our borrowed dresses, those of assimilation, and affirm our being, that is our negritude [...]. To be truly ourselves, we ought to embody the negro-African culture in the realities of the twentieth century. For our negritude to be an effective instrument of liberation [...] we had to shake off the dust and assert it in the international movement of the contemporary world" (Césaire is quoted in Wilfred Cartey, *Whispers from a Continent: The Literature of Contemporary Black Africa*, p. 45)

⁶ Kenyan culturalist critic would not say anything different. He too writes, "Everyone in the world has a language, either the language of his or her parents or one adopted at birth or at a later stage in life. [...] Every language has two aspects. One aspect is its role as an agent that enables us to communicate with one another in our struggle to find the means for survival. The other is its role as a carrier of the history and the culture built into the process of that communication over time" (Ngugi, 1998: 48).

l'influence sera presque insignifiante en Afrique. Il faut attendre la fin de la Deuxième Guerre, pour voir les idées panafricaines et nationalistes se propager parmi les intellectuels francophones" [The nationalist and pan-Africanist ideas that originated in the US toward the end of the 19th century were integrated by a small group of African intellectuals living in Paris. These African intellectuals would barely have an impact on Africa. These ideas became disseminated among Francophone intellectuals at the end of World War II] (Kaké, 65).

Clearly, the Negritude poets' seizing of the oppressor's language (which is the bearer of the oppressor's own culture and meaning in the world) is a critical turn. It changed people's perception about the Black. Language was used by the African student in a the same sophisticated, and perhaps even more, as the so-called owner of the French language.

Abioseh Davidson Nicol's relation to the English language with its attending reasons and ideology is special. Just like many Anglophone African writers and artists trained to be excellent in the colonizer's language, while retaining for the most part their cultural heritage, Nicol originated from a Sierra Leonean educated and elite Creole community. For instance, unlike many Anglophone writers of his day, he was a holder of a PhD in 1958 from Christ's College, Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. To the English Creole identity later on accrued the African identity of Nicol. The poet added a Nigerian name to his "English" name most probably after he immersed in a distinctively African community like Nigeria where he was holding a post of lecturing, especially at the University of Ibadan.

The social status of Nicol is also comparable to some of African-American artists of the Harlem Renaissance, and especially Countee Cullen. In fact, Cullen is one of the best educated Blacks of his day. This *recherché* education seethed through his writing, though the latter was used, rightly or wrongly, to put forth the African distinctiveness of Blacks in the predominantly white American society where they sought to be integrated. The language used by the Negritude artist certainly made a point: the Black person is also capable of handling (the other guy's) language, even though such was done in order to advance an African cause. It is in that sense Kimberly Smith's words have to be understood when she writes, "One promising place to look is the black intellectual tradition. [...] The black intellectual tradition reflects both blacks' unique experiences and the broader American culture; it is, as Henry Louis Gates put it, 'two-toned,' both distinctly black and recognizably American" (Smith 280).

Blackness, Africanness or African-consciousness lies in the heart of the literary productions of the artists of Negritude and the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, as much Francophone African students in France used the language of the master to seek their freedom by particularizing the language appropriated by way of coloring the latter with their Africanness, so too in the Black intellectual tradition in America is African-American. Here lies the difference between the African poet and the American poet of the caliber of Cullen and the like. That's why, it is imperative to investigate the relationship of these two kinds of Africa-related poetry in what they have in common and where they diverge.

2. What does Africa mean to these poets?

Speaking of Africa, one tends to think that all Africans have the same close ties with Africa. In Africa, some Africans, dark as dark can be (especially in Africa south of the Sahara commonly referred to as Black Africa), disparagingly speak sometimes about the Motherland. One ought not to be surprised at all when this is done by someone snatched and/or stolen away from Africa and sold into slavery in as far a foreign land as the United States. The resentment of the Diasporic Africans of the Americas expressed through the "You sold us!" trope complicates matters when it comes to assessing the relationship between Africa(ns) and African-Americans. Kimberly Smith finds that the sense of identity is inextricably linked to the land; where one belongs shapes one's identity. This is what she means when saying that "The black tradition [...] is centrally concerned with the relationship between identity and landscape, and particularly the historical relationship between community and the land as that relationship is mediated by memory" (Smith 281). It can reasonably be said that the fact that African-Americans were uprooted from Africa and that the later generations we now know and interact with are distinctively American. Though some share the same skin tone with Africans, they no less are American with the attending idiosyncrasies: "I am an American!", the majority would respond when attempted to be linked to Africa. That's why I completely concur with Langley when the latter writes that "[A]lthough African American identity is inextricably tied to Africa, it is both dishonest and irresponsible to superficially offer Afro-America as a stand-in or representative for Africa. We must not conflate Africa with Afro-America -one is not equivalent to the other" (Langley X).

2.1. The Poetic Visions of the Three Poets

David Diop speaks of an Africa he has not *really* laid his eyes on: he was born in Europe. Admittedly, the poet died in plane crash on the Dakar shore in 1961 when he

was returning from some meeting in Sekou Toure's Guinea, where a historic "No" was pronounced against Charles de Gaulle's so-called "Communauté française" in 1958. All know how politically and ideologically engaged David Diop was in his vision for an Africa that mattered both at the local and the international stages, once freed from the strictures the man-made hurdles and natural challenges. Reading from the only book of poetry, *Coups de pilon* that he bequeathed to the posterity, one can realize how the man was ready to do everything necessary and realistic for the Motherland. Diop had a vision: freedom of Africa does not have to be negotiated; it must be taken back. This is harbinger of the stamina that later got hold of some independence movements that went violent against the colonizer after the 1960's. According to Lilyan Kesteloot, "La violence et la simplicité de son langage faisaient de ses poèmes de véritables coups de poing dont l'efficacité - cette période de lutte - était incontestable" [the violence and the simplicity of Diop's language used to make his poetry truly effective punches at that time] (Kesteloot 149). His "Africa" poem shows this violent truth about what happened to Africa. Diop does poetry devoid of unpractical aesthetics, i.e., a kind of writing celebrating the beauty of Africa for the mere sake of doing so. He is one that is engaged ideologically and realistically. Thus, some lines in his book of poetry stands as the explainer of his poetic vision. For example, Diop writes, "Que le poète puise dans le meilleur de lui-même ce qui reflète les valeurs de son pays, et sa poésie sera nationale. Mieux, elle sera un message pour tous, un message qui traversera les frontières" [The poet must tap into his own self the values of his homeland, and his poetry shall be national. Better still, it will be a message for one and all, a message going across the borders] (Diop, in Kesteloot 152). Diop stands against some form of poetry writing that had currency among the poets of the Negritude using the colonizer's language. In fact, in the long term, Diop envisioned an indigenous language (poetry-)writing, in his opinion, original writing ensues from using one's own language rather than the master's.⁷ Cabral, Ngugi and

⁷ About this specific point, Diop writes, "Le créateur africain, privé de l'usage de sa langue et coupé de son peuple, risque de n'être plus que le représentant d'un courant littéraire (et pas forcément le moins gratuit) de la nation conquérante. Ses œuvres, devenues par l'inspiration et le style la parfaite illustration de la politique assimilationniste, provoqueront sans nul doute les applaudissements chaleureux d'une certaine critique. En fait, ces louanges iront surtout à la colonisation qui, lorsqu'elle ne parvient plus à maintenir ses sujets en esclavage. En fait des intellectuels dociles aux modes occidentales.[...] [E]n écrivant dans une langue qui n'est pas celle de ses frères il ne peut véritablement traduire le chant profond de son pays" [The African creator who is stripped of his language and cut off from his people runs the risk of being the mouthpiece of a literary current (not necessarily in a gratuitous way) of the conquering nation. His works, by way of inspiration and now the perfect illustrations of the assimilation policy, will undoubtedly yield welcoming ovations of a certain kind of critics. Actually, these ovations will accrue to colonialization which, when unable to keep its subjects in servility, turns them into

even Fanon would later on add more emphasis to this point. Diop's originality is not as folkloristic as has been the conflation of the writing in French with xenisms, African foreignisms, or words miming the indigenous language-culture with the myths and mysteries lying in them. Such an art, "renverra en fait à la bourgeoisie colonialiste l'image rassurante qu'elle souhaite voir. C'est là le plus sûr moyen de fabriquer une poésie de 'folklore' dont seuls les salons où l'on discute 'd'art nègre' se déclareront émerveillés"[sends the positive signal that the colonialist bourgeoisie would love to see. It the surest way of creating a folkloristic poetry that makes only book clubs discussing Negro art happy] (Diop 153).

Like Diop, multitalented Abioseh Nicol⁸ sees Africa as a place that is not a mass of exotic and surrealist beings and things. The reader of "The Meaning of Africa" can see that Nicol does not buy into, say, the US idea that Africa is a country. George W. Bush was caught saying such a thing at an official meeting. Nicol's poetic philosophy can be seen through a piece he wrote about poetry in 1961. At the end of the descriptive features and aspects of poetry in West Africa, the poet and educator would add this:

As one would expect, Negro poetry sings first of the fight against injustice and oppression. As the battles are won, one by one, it is beginning to sing of the things which surrounds it: the dark forest, the village changing into town, the self-sacrifice demanded of all, and the black image of the Christian and Moslem god. Soon it will sing more clearly, with the individual voice of the poet searching for his truths sharing this search with millions all over the world. (Nicol 122)

From bottom up, one clearly sees that Nicol begins with the poet's mode of operation and priorities. If were European or Western poetry and representation, it would have started with the poet's own preoccupations and emotions, and what profoundly and individualistically mattered to him/her. Then, will come what matters to the environment in which he/she lives. Nicol and Diop's relation to Africa is, first and foremost, a matter of fighting against injustice and oppression created by the violent colonial contact with Europe (domination and destruction of the cultures of the colonized) and America (with slavery and its attending mutations).

intellectuals ready to consume Western fashions. [...] When he writes in a language other than that of his own brothers, he will prove unable to translate faithfully the true songs of his homeland] (p. 153).

⁸Abioseh Nicol's approach to Africa resonates through Wayne Visser poetry in contemporary Africa. Visser has something like this: "I am an African/Not because I was born there/But because my heart beats with Africa's/I am an African/Not because my skin is black/But because my mind is engaged by Africa/I am an African/Not because I live on its soil/But because my soul is at home in Africa" (Visser2).⁸

The poetic vision of Countee Cullen is deeply imbedded in the Western canon such as described by Harold Bloom, the author of a book by the same name: *The Western Canon*.⁹ If Bloom does not discuss Black writing per se, some African-American writers nonetheless wrote in the same aesthetical vein as Westerners like Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, and Montaigne, down to Marcel Proust who are discussed in Bloom's book. This is much different from poetry like the one authored by poets like Paul Laurence Dunbar, and even Langston Hughes who was one of the prominent authors/ poets of the Harlem Renaissance movement who would literally musicalize his poems because he sought it to sound African-American and to speak to African-Americans in the first place. All available biographical literature on Cullen praises the author for his savvy and erudition. He is said to have graduated, Phi Beta Kappa, from New York University with a BA and a year later received an MA from Harvard University. In 1930, he was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship to study for two years in Europe. A poem by Countee Cullen like "And Yet Do I Marvel" shows how Cullen's written poetry is classical, pristine, and Westernly well-informed. The versification rules are tightly respected, the grammar is highly cared for, the source of the story is the cradle of civilization where Greek mythology leaves no room for African imagination and images like in Hughes poetry where the poet summons Africa of Old and the things in it. Cullen's sophistication could not allow to see Africa in a way different from how he depicted the continent and how he related to it.

Clearly, here one poet is definitely aloof, dubious of his African origins and the other two are somehow longing for integration into the cultural economy of what may be called Africanhood.

2.2. *Certain Image of Africa: Diop and Nicol's Love and Cullen's Ambivalence*

Africa means different things for the three poets. For one, Diop and Nicol see Africa as the homeland to come back to after wandering around the globe. As said earlier, Diop was born in Europe where he was served an image of Africa that Achebe so brilliantly analyzes in his article "An Image of Africa." Diop speaks of Africa as one would one's lover. In the French language where the poem stands in its splendor better than in English, Diop thus addresses Africa: "Afrique mon Afrique" [Africa, my beloved Africa/Continent]; "Afrique des fiers guerriers dans les savanes ancestrales"

⁹ One of the rarest people of African descent reviewed or cited by Bloom in his book is Ishamel Reed for his eclectic and multigeneric way of writing *Mumbo Jumbo*. See *The Western Canon* on page 565.

[Africa with valiant warriors who are source of pride in the century-old savannah of the continent].

Diop's image of Africa is one that aggrandizes the Motherland by way of seeing in it the memories of the great empires and kingdoms of African past like Kaya Maghan's Ghana, Sundiata of Old Mali, Soni Ali Ber's Songhay which are all recorded in history as having mattered and shaped the mind of West Africans. In the imaginary of Arabs, who initiated the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Europeans, who took up the slave trade where it was left off by Arabs, are major kings like Mansa Kankan Musa on the map of the tentative of Africa and Shaka the Zulu. For African people, whether Afrocentric or not, these people matter as much as Achilles or any other Greek warrior celebrated in Western mythologies and history. The same idea of Africa in the past lies in the words of Abioseh Nicol, who begins his poem calling on Africa: "Africa, you were once just a name to me".

At first glance, the verse may allow for conjecture of the kind having it that Nicol used to see Africa as a bunch of myths and tales, thereby not to be taken seriously, the truth remains that Nicol who attended one of most prestigious universities (with its ideological implications for self-perceptions of an African). Yet, the poet no less sees the continent in the simplistic way that some people see it. Some believe, even today, that Africa is a country. Nicol vigorously corrects this approach: "You are not a country, Africa,/ You are a concept,/ Fashioned in our minds, each to each/ To hide our separate fears,/ To dream our separate dreams...." To speak of Africa as a country has a reductionist implication. Those people think that the continent is an undifferentiated and homogenous whole that is, on top of all, monolithic. Nicol shows that the African comes from a place with multiples languages and cultures, and that he/she is a human being who experiences fear and has dreams like anybody else. Africa is a place where hope, happiness and progress is present, able to be furthered. Despite what befell the continent (slave trade, colonization and their attending havoc and people and their cultures), Africa is, according to David Diop, a tree that "patiently, stubbornly growing again/ and its fruits are carefully learning/ the sharp sweep taste of liberty" while Nico confesses that he now knows what Africa is: "Happiness, contentment, and fulfilment". Like Diop, Nicol uses the image of a bird and a tree to symbolize the continent: "And a small bird singing on a mango tree." The bird is due to grow, produce more of its kind, sing the freedom had by the continent after the throes of colonization, and all of this on a tree that represent substance in tropical Africa where green leaves alternate with the dry season harbingering the falling rain.

Cullen's Africa is a sad one that comes straight from the White bourgeois and racist mythological depictions of the African continent and the people in it. In his "Heritage", Cullen answers the question as to what Africa is to him. We know that Africa is "A book one thumbs/Listlessly, till slumber comes." This is typical of the colonialist discourse on Africa. As Achebe, writes, it is a discourse on "Africa's inglorious past (raffia skirts)" (Achebe 1978:7). This is evocative of litany of weird and savage/barbaric instances that repeat what we all know some thinkers of high caliber said about Africa like Joseph Conrad, or Hegel, among others, who did not set foot on the African soil but who pretend to know all about this place to the point of calling it and its people snide names. Didn't Hegel call Africa the "Dark Continent"?¹⁰ Like these "Africanists", Cullen sees the continent in terms of "Copper sun", "scarlet sea", "jungle star", "strong bronzed men". Apparently, these references may sound evocative of a mode of life/living that is natural, "normal", "universal" -whatever this may mean under the logocentric skies of the First World-, except that such a depiction reminds of the exotic and glamourizing Tarzanesque images present in children's books in the West about Africa and the otherized part of the world.

Those images are the declivity for the imperialist discourse of the colonizing mission that preceded the violent contact of Europe with Africa. Cullen wants nothing else for Africa to be remembered by save for sounds originated from "wild barbaric birds/ Goaded massive jungle herds"; "...cats/crouching in the river reeds,/ Stalking gentle flesh that feeds/ By the river brink...". Besides, Cullen gives a place of pride to the rain and the effect thereof on him in the jungle that he thinks Africa is. In fact, he has no respite from the rain: "So I he, who never quite/ Safely sleep from rain at night -/ I can never rest at all/ When the rain begins to fall" or "Rain works on me night and day".

Cullen's depiction of Africa echoes the Hegelian apprehension of the continent in the dichotomic logic whereby Africa is posited as an ugly, strange and animal-like Other in need to be redeemed from savagery and forced into civilization, thus the "mission

¹⁰ This philosopher writes that "The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas-the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law—in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state" (Hegel, 1956: 93).

civilisatrice” undergirding the entire imperial agenda drafted out and /implemented in Berlin in 1888, but thought out much earlier as the Atlantic Slave Trade.

The idea of hushing Africa against her will into the Western humanist and universalist agenda still has currency in living-room way far from the eyesight of those who are the subjects and objects of the discourse. Some even speak out against what had been said with capped mouth in Europe. In 2007, Sarkozy was condescendingly courageous enough to come down in Africa at a well-known university to say that “Le drame de l’Afrique, c’est que l’homme africain n’est pas assez centré dans l’histoire” [The problem with Africa is that the African people did not fully integrate themselves into History].¹¹

Of course, history is supposed to mean the Western way of life, white skin tone, and more importantly the Judeo-Christian faith, although the heartland of Christianity is closer to the African continent in mode of living and physical appearance than to Caucasoid Europeans. It is worth elaborating more on the religious element, which says more about the presence of the Christian faith in Cullen’s poem. He speaks of some people that worship “Quaint, outlandish heathen gods/ Black men fashion out of rods,/ Clay, and brittle bits of stone,/ In likeness like their own/I belong to Jesus Christ,/ Preacher of humility;/ Heathen gods are naught to me,” which he opposes to the presence of Jesus Christ in his life and the Western world. This way of seeing things issues from the binary oppositionality consubstantial in Western mode of apprehending that which is different in black-and-white terms, whereby the white term of the paradigm is given paramount importance.

Yet, in this business of allegiance, there is some ambivalence, irresoluteness in Cullen. He seems not to be sure of his own Christianity. He speaks of Christianity with his mouth because his heart is elsewhere: “...although I speak/ With my mouth thus, in my heart/ Do I play a double part”. This lack of resolution and firmness in his belief is a sign of some “nationalism” in Cullen. What “blackness” is he referring to here? Whiteness can not serve his need. And yet, he asks forgiveness from God because he

¹¹Here is the full context of the words of the former French President: “Le drame de l’Afrique, c’est que l’homme africain n’est pas assez centré dans l’histoire. Le paysan africain, qui depuis des millénaires, vit avec les saisons, dont l’idéal de vie est d’être en harmonie avec la nature, ne connaît que l’éternel recommencement du temps rythmé par la répétition sans fin des mêmes gestes et des mêmes paroles. Dans cet imaginaire où tout recommence toujours, il n’y a de place ni pour l’aventure humaine, ni pour l’idée de progrès. [The problem with Africa is that the African people did not fully integrate themselves into History. The African farmer who, for centuries, communes with the seasons, whose ideal life is being in full harmony with nature, only knows the perpetual beginnings of time [the seasons] with the endless repetition of the same gestures and spoken words. In this situation of perpetual repetition there is no room for human adventure, nor the idea of progress] The speech is available at : <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/11/09/le-discours-de-dakar_976786_3212.html>.

cannot help believing that Christianity lies behind the behavior of those who want him not in the US, a country his forebears built in sweat and blood. Cullen thinks that his belief should be directed by his human needs, which are clearly “black,” “African,” etc. Is this a form of return to his true self and to his culture and the reality attached to his being black in America?

3. Africinity redefined and the way forward

Place is fundamental here when it comes to speaking of identity in these poems. In fact, the poems are about a place, a home called Africa. The place where one lives speaks volume about one’s history and being. The identity of a people is shaped by its environment just like the container gives its own shape to the liquid. According to Kimberly Smith, “The black tradition [...] is centrally concerned with the relationship between identity and landscape, and particularly the historical relationship between community and the land as that relationship is mediated by memory” (Smith 281). Though some African-Americans like Wheatley, because of the white-washing effects of slavery, sought to be rescued from their blackness associated with backwardness, the truth remains that Blacks in the US have retained a good deal of their former cultural self in their new home. Smith couldn’t be righter when she maintained that “The Africans enslaved and forcibly transported to the New World brought a different set of conceptual resources. Although religiously diverse, most enslaved Africans embraced an animistic belief system that imbued the natural world with spiritual meaning” (Smith 281). If this claim is correct, one can state that Africa has always remained with the enslaved African in America.

Clearly, those among them willing to deepen this connection will seek to get closer ties with the people from the continent or simply they will travel to Africa. The whole “Back to Africa” idea must rather be capture, not from the physical visits of Black Americans to Africa, but through attempts to reconnect by way of seeing Africa from the angle of view that see the continent and the people for who and what they truly are. Of course, some preferred to execute a pilgrimage of sort to reconnect. Delany Martin and Alexander Crummell travelled to Africa in order to get firsthand information about the Motherland. In fact, from 1859-1860 (as short as this stay may have been) Delany was in Liberia while Crummell was in the country from 1873 as a minister and professor.

Yet, Africa is the seat of a great deal of crisscrossed feelings. This continent has been the subject of a great deal of conquering and curtsying. The continent has also been the object of love from part of those who sought to reaffirm their identity and

sameness in a world where Westernization and/or Euro-Americanization is the order and where difference is shunned. The continent, likewise, has had a great dose of self-deprecation and love-hate responses from some of its own children who now see in it the source of their extirpation from Africa to the far-flung spaces (the so-called New World or Newfoundland) unknown to them hitherto.

Diop, Nicol, like Senghor and his Negritude fellows had some vision and dreams to realize and this, from their gaits, could only be achieved through self-immersion and celebration of what they themselves had lost. This, in and of itself, is not to be reviled. The problem would only arise out of some fossilized and monolithic approach to Africa whereby the poet would paint Blackness with a glamourizing brush without regard to the reality facing the real people Africa is also about. This is exactly the point made by Fanon when he shunned the "Africaist" type of writing in vogue at one point in time. He writes in the 1960's that "The colonized intellectual who returns to his people through works of art behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he will not hesitate to use the local dialects to demonstrate his desire to be as close to the people as possible, but the ideas he expresses, the preoccupations that haunt him are in no way related to the daily lot of the men and women of his country" (Fanon 2004: 160). The poems of Diop and Nicol raise the real questions addressing the hopes and wants of real people in Africa.

To the African-Americans, the story of Africa is different and has differing meanings. For example, while Langston Hughes speaks of an Africa that he identifies with: "I am a Negro/ Black as the night is black, /Black like the depths of my Africa,"¹² LeRoi Jones says it flat out in his "Notes for a Speech":

African blues does not know me....
Does not feel what I am....
Those heads, I call my "people."
Africa is a foreign place. You are
as any other sad man here american.¹³

The verses by Jones here are the epitome of the unsaid of Cullen's reaction in "Heritage", and this is typical of African-Americans. Cullen is echoed by Jones here and this comes as no surprise and it could not be otherwise. What ties do the sons and daughters of former slaves have with Africa? They have to be commended for longing to be part of a place where they have been taken away from. The ambivalence

¹² These two verses are repeated at the beginning and the end of the poem "Negro" in Arnold Rampersad's *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, p. 24.

¹³ See LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "Notes for a Speech". *The Beat Patrol*. To read at the following address: <https://beatpatrol.wordpress.com/2008/09/07/leroi-jones-notes-for-a-speech/>

or the aloofness expressed in their work of art is “normal” though they too sought to draw some dividends from their “blackness” while retaining their “Americanness.” This implies that they navigate on the “two-ness” that well expresses their ipseity in the belly of the US. Blackness has been exploited politically, educationally, and economically by Black Americans. The thing is just that what serves in this identity is appropriated and what does disservices is disowned. In other words, if Africa were painted positively by Euro-Americans and presented advantages that could add up to the economic security that so matters to all in the US, the continent would be defended as Diop and Nicol had been doing in their works. The question is how should the Africa subject be used by African intellectuals and artists.¹⁴

African-Consciousness is present in the three works; it needs to be used in a way that reinforces the humanity of the people with black skin tone, and create in the people a sense of self of which there will be no shame to feel and no political dividends to be tapped. This reorientation of the identity is one of the warrants of safety valves for the continent and the people. That’s why new forms of Africa-related works and discourses are to be commended.

CONCLUSION

The poems of Cullen, Diop and Nicol speak about Africa. They do it in different ways because the poets with direct ties to Africa see the continent with different lenses. They are closer to home both geographically (though Diop was in France, he travelled to Africa, and Nicol studied abroad and came back to the Motherland) and emotionally.

Though the three poets, at their own pace and every own ways, express some relation to Africa, each seems to have a distinctive touch that particularizes the connection to the continent. No doubt, Abioseh Nicol is an African scholar; he seeks to reconnect with Africa because he too was the son of former African slaves who relocated to Africa once freed in the US from the shackles of slavery. The name adoption and the

¹⁴ Diop provides a sort of blueprint for the African intellectuals who should refrain from romanticization of Africa and adopt a realistic depiction of the reality faced by people on the continent. He writes: “L’art doit toujours être l’art de son époque, c’est-à-dire au service des besoins de la société qui l’a engendré, [et] l’artiste africain qui écrira pour le seul plaisir de chanter la beauté des nuages, qui fera des descriptions par pure virtuosité, ou qui sculptera des formes pour elles-mêmes, vit en dehors des nécessités de son époque.” [Art has to always be the product of its own time. In fact, it should serve the society that made it possible. If the African artist/writer’s productions are meant for the celebration of beauty for its own sake, or to show how able they are, then he/she is simply not part of his/her time] (Diop 1979: 535).

choice to work in Nigeria are markers of his longing for Africanness that he truly did not have. The poem he authored on the continent also shows that he had dreams for Africa. He wanted a continent that could gather itself up after being scrambled by the Europeans, violated by colonization and stripped of its humanity. Efforts like Abioseh Nicol's were meant to recalibrate the priorities in a post-Independence Africa. Like Nicol, Diop had plans for the Motherland. Diop wanted total freedom for Africa as can be seen in other poems of his on the continent. The last verse of his "Africa" is a testimony to his dream of an Africa that is self-reliant, free, and worthwhile among the other peoples and places of the world. The attitudes of Diop and Nicol are reinscribed in the Negritude approach to their conditions and the attempts used to escape the said predicaments. Jean-Paul Sartre was right then when he wrote that "The Negro who vindicates his negritude in a revolutionary movement places himself, then and there, upon the terrain of Reflection, whether he wishes to rediscover in himself certain objective traits growing out of African civilization, or hopes to find the black Essence in the wells of his soul" (Sartre, 1976: 17).

Unlike the African poets, Cullen clearly "unsings" and unwrites Africa (painting the homeland with Enlightenment snide remarks) certainly because of grudges and misinformation fed him by the Western anti-African education he received. It looks like the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance, except for Langston Hughes with his Congo poems, see Africa with a Western ethnographer's eyes. This is what can be said about Gwendolyn Bennett despite her several celebrations of Blackness in poems like *To the Dark Girl* and *Heritage*. In "Heritage", for example, she too sings the heathenish and weird Black people of the bush. Doesn't she write this in 1923: "I want to hear the chanting/ Around a heathen fire/ Of a strange black race"?

Conversely, Diop and Nicol are Africa-residing and "nationalist" poets. They are the singing griots for Africa, Unlike the Mande griots who sing praise-songs celebrating the prowess and valiance of the great heroes of yesteryears in Africa, these contemporary griots seek to retrieve Africa from the claws of the oppressing forces from without. By so doing, they place her on a pedestal where all can see it as a place that matters and deserves to take part in the making of a world where different peoples and cultures speak and act together for a better humankind. In that sense, Diop and Nicol are adamant as sing Africa of today with all the vicissitudes and challenges the post-Independence nation-states have to confront: Africa must be free, her children have to be proud. Singing Africa still continues.

It ought to be added that new poems on Africa have emerged since. Likewise, other new narrative forms celebrating and naming the continent and knitting connection

means being proud of one's Africanness like Diop and Nicol. It is just hoped that what Diop and Nicol have sought out in their poems will reveal to be the bright future of Africa.

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