SEMANTIC RELATIONS IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
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"WHAT IS AFRICA TO ME?" THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE IN QUEST OF AFRICA/IDENTITY

What made Harlem exceptional during the 1920s was its exuberant flowering of intellectual and cultural life. In the artistic movement which came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance, African American artists were attempting to convince the general public that they had maintained their cultural individuality in the dominant white American culture and to stress the need for further study of African American culture and history in order to understand their inherited African roots. Arthur A. Schomburg's words, "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future,"[1] became the motto of African American artists of the period. Therefore, it is not surprising that among numerous works of art (both literary and visual) we find many that present self-evaluation of the race and its history as leading themes. African American artists realized the deep need for re-examination of their place in American reality in order to find some inner integrity as artists.

Let us begin with poetry and one of the leading poetical voices of the time: Langston Hughes. The speaker of the "Proem", to his volume *The Weary Blues* (1926), pinpoints this basic dilemma in the discussion of the New Negro artist who first must come to terms with black history and then eventually draw energy from the depths of racial experience:

> I am a Negro:
> Black as the night is black,
> Black like the depths of my Africa.
> I've been a slave:
> Ceasar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
> I brushed the boots of Washington.

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[1] Arthur A. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past"; in *The New Negro. Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Alain Locke, New York, 1925, pp. 231.

I've been a worker:
Under my hands the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.
I've been a singer:
All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.
I've been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in Congo.
They lynch me now in Texas.
I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

Hughes believes, that in spite of centuries of suffering and cultural loss, African Americans have a rich history which reaches beyond the American slave experience into the distant African past, a history to be learned and to be proud of. In spite of the lowly social roles the Negro had played in history, where he was primarily a slave and/or a worker, we cannot overlook his role as an agent in the development of past economies. Equally important, though throughout history he has been, and still is in many ways, a victim who has suffered and still suffers; he is also an artist – a singer – a poet.

But how is "my Africa" defined? And essentially "What is Africa to me"? – to use the first line of the poem "Heritage" by Countee Cullen contained in *The New Negro* (1925).[2] Cullen was not the only one to ponder this issue. The question was echoed by intellectuals (W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke), social activists (Marcus Garvey and A. Philip Randolph) and numerous African American artists of the times, becoming a central metaphor in shaping their identity and artistic output.

How did African Americans imagine Africa, the continent of their ethnic origin but, nevertheless, so distant? James H. Meriwether investigates this issue and notices that the popular image of Africa underwent significant changes and was modified both by events taking place on the "dark continent" as well as those in the United States.[3] According to him, one thing is clear: the nineteenth century representation of the continent was primarily negative and echoed both the popular opinions and widespread stereotypes of Africa as a backward and even savage continent – a representation reflecting the then-dominant, highly judgmental Euro-centric approach to foreign cultures, referring to them as "primitive" or "savage". For all that, Africa was still a vital source of symbols and imagery for African Americans. It seems that religion had to some extent nourished and strengthened pro-African sentiments. David's psalm (68 : 31): "A Princess shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God" and other frequent Biblical references to Ethiopia (i.e. Africa) inspired and gave hope and dignity to African

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[2] Ibidem, p. 250

[3] J. H. Meriwether (2002).

Americans during the time of slavery and in the years that followed.[4] The importance of the image is demonstrated by the numerous African American religious congregations with Ethiopia in their names. The turn of the century marked a turning point within the black community as to how Africa was imagined and what place it had in elevating the race consciousness and shaping the identity of African Americans.

One of the incentives for these more positive views and the "romanticization of Africa" was the "... collective need for heroes or homelands."[5] It resulted in the growing conviction that Africa was the cradle of great civilizations and rich cultures (ancient Egypt and Ethiopia) which through the mediation of modern African Americans, could significantly contribute to the development of American culture. Africa had even a wider role to play in "rehabilitating the race in world esteem"[6] Representations of Africa, according to Michel Faith, due to scarce knowledge about the continent were bound to be simplified, symbolic, and "Pan-African", fusing Egyptian and West African images.[7] Therefore, the Ethiopian and Egyptian "homelands" appear as symbols representing the dark continent as a whole: Meta Warrick Fuller's sculpture *The Awakening of Ethiopia* (ca. 1914), W.E.B. DuBois's pageant Star of Ethiopia (first draft dated in 1911), Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926), where the "I" speaker says: "I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it."[8]

Faith concludes that the Egyptian and Ethiopian heritage was "clearly fabricated" but had a role to play in creating a myth which symbolically united "unsolvable oppositions and contradictory identifications".[9] "Africa" therefore functioned as a symbol and a metaphor of a distant continent, a vague concept, a fantasy rather than a reference to a specific geographical location and cultural heritage. Both the geographical location and cultural heritage are confused; as Cullen Gruesser notes, Ethiopianism "refers to the whole continent of Africa rather than simply East African nations".[10] In spite of this obvious misinterpretation, Africa and its Ethiopian/Egyptian representation became a key metaphor for the Harlem Renaissance artists. In the autobiographical *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois repeats Countee Cullen's question: "What is Africa to me?" (page 639) and acknowledges that his affinity with the continent is imagined and is to a great extent an intellectual construct: "Living with my mother's people I absorbed their culture patterns and these were not African so much as Dutch and New England ... My African racial feeling was then purely a matter of my own later learning and reaction ... But it was none the less real and a large determinant of my life character."[11]

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[4] E. Ullendorff (1989 : 5-14).

[5] J. Scott Holloway (2002 : 96, 97)

[6] *The New Negro*, op. cit., p. 14

[7] M. Faith (2001 : 54).

[8] Ibidem, p. 55, 56. Faith also speculates here on the image of Egypt (Ole Pharaoh) in African American culture.

[9] Ibidem, p. 57

[10] C. Gruesser (2000 : 1).

[11] W.E.B. Du Bois (1986 : 638).

For Langston Hughes, Africa and America were "unsolvable oppositions", demonstrating with "equal assurance his two credos of identity: 'I Too Sing America' and 'I am a Negro'. But by affirming these polar commitments, Hughes alienated himself from both of them. As a black man, he was aware that his race had never been granted full participation in the American dream."[12] In "Afro-American Fragment", Hughes portrays this predicament:

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood –
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue –
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums – and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place –
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face.[13]

Here is an expression of longing for a heritage, identity, and community. The speaker is separated from Africa by physical and spatial dimensions – the continent is geographically distant. But what makes Africa even more tragically removed, are its cultural and spiritual elements which may be experienced only "[t]hrough some vast mist", a vague subconscious feeling where even the drums are "[s]ubdued and time-lost". Although through education ("history books") and music ("songs", "words sad-sung"), the past is in a sense recreated, it is a mere substitute that essentially bars any real spiritual tie with the homeland. The speaker experiences the history that is given back to him as something artificial and limited; it turns out that the knowledge obtained is incapable of assisting him in any way in decoding the elements of Africa's culture: "There comes this song / I do not understand". He realizes that there is no simple method for recovering his lost African identity. The American experience, the Middle Passage and the years of slavery, have alienated him from the land and the culture of his ancestors and the "link between Africans and African-Americans ... has been disrupted or transformed to the point that it can no longer be clearly defined."[14]

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[12] R. Smith (1997 : 270).

[13] L. Hughes (1994 : 129).

Hughes records his personal quest for Africa in the autobiographical *The Big Sea* (1940). He reports of his travel to Africa as a seaman in 1923, where he experienced the continent first-hand (in fact Hughes and DuBois were among the few significant authors of the era who had the opportunity to travel to Africa) and observed: "I was only an American Negro – who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa – but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem."[15] One might ask why Hughes felt that he lacked an authentic cultural tie with Africa. The answer seems to be in the fact that his Americanness alienated him from his ethnic roots – he was "only an American Negro" (my emphasis). When he addresses West Coast Africans that "Our problems in America are very much like yours" and that "I am a Negro too", the response is quite sarcastic: "They only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: "You, white man! You, white man!" Hughes's "copper-brown skin and straight black hair" made him in their eyes "a white man".[16] Culturally and even physically he was a stranger, an alien in a foreign land. One of the Africans, a Kru from Liberia, voiced the reasons for such a reaction:

> Here, ... on the West Coast, there are not many colored people – people of mixed blood – and those foreign colored men who are here come mostly as missionaries, to teach us something, since they think we know nothing. Or they come from the West Indies, as clerks and administrators in the colonial governments, to help carry out the white man's laws. So the Africans call them all white men.[17]

In spite of the rejection he experienced, Hughes saw Africa – the land – and the people – the Diaspora – as "we", "my people", "our land" and included himself as its legitimate descendant. Although it is an imagined land and community, it offers a sense of belonging, heritage, and pride. Hughes's previously mentioned poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926) demonstrates his unity with this conceptualized Africa. Just as other artists of the time, Hughes draws nourishing energy, both as a source of identity and artistic imagery, from the well of Africa – "the American Black man's romantic motherland."[18]

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[14] E. JAMES SMETHURST (1999 : 98).

[15] L. HUGHES (1986 : 325).

[16] Ibidem, p. 102-103.

[17] Ibidem.

[18] R. K. BARKSDALE (1977 : 17).

For most, however, interest in Africa was simply a desire to learn about the their past, to learn about their roots and cultural heritage. Most African American periodicals, *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity* in particular, published numerous articles reflecting the glorious past in which "the Negroes of Ethiopia were among the great rulers of the World."[19]

Zora Neale Hurston is another vivid example. Both her anthropological studies and her fiction are saturated with African elements. Her famous line from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), although written after the Renaissance had already faded, represents this symbolic "homeland" inspiring many artists of the time: "If I never see you no' mo' on earth, Ah'll meet you in Africa".[20] Although "so far away", the meeting place materializes as an imagined dimension, a construct fundamental for the African American artist.

For social activists, Marcus Garvey in particular, Africa was not a "fabricated" image at all, but the basic ideological concept on the foundation of which he built the Back-to- Africa ideology of his movement, as well as a rhetorical device which dominated the discourse of his speeches and writings.

The theme of search for identity and heritage is echoed continuously throughout *The Survey Graphic* (March 1925), subtitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro" – the first comprehensive study devoted entirely to African Americans and Harlem in particular. In the quest to establish a new tradition in the visual arts (an area of artistic creativity almost completely non-existent among the African Americans because "the Negro in his American environment ha[d] turned to the art of music, the dance, and poetry, an emphasis quite different from that of African culture"[21]), Alain Locke, the editor and the leading intellectual force behind the publication of this magazine, turned to Africa as a possible source of inspiration. In his short article "The Art of the Ancestors", which he would eventually extend and publish in *The New Negro. Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925) under the title "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts", he not only discusses the importance of African art to the development of European modernism of the day ("attested influences are to be found in the work of Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, ... and others"[22]), but also expresses the hope that African art would become a stimulant to the "plastic arts" of African Americans. Just like the European modernists centering in Paris who were "profoundly influenced by the aesthetics of this [African] art"[23], Locke expresses his hope that African aesthetics will eventually "exert upon the artistic development of the American Negro the influence that it has already had upon modern European artists."[24]

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[19] The Crisis, May, 1925, p. 38.
[20] Z. N. HURSTON (1937, 1976 : 231).
[21] Survey Graphic (1925 : 651).
[22] Ibidem, p. 673.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibidem.

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Locke saw the extent and importance of African art in the revitalisation of European art by freeing it from the stifling influence of academia and expressed the hope that it would now similarly stimulate African American artists.

Locke's article "The Art of the Ancestors", and the pages that follow are the most fully "African" of the whole issue of *The Survey Graphic*. The article is illustrated by photographs of African sculptures from Dahomey, Sudan-Niger, Bushango and the Ivory Coast. All the photographs are of artifacts ("exemplars of the art of the ancestors"[25], as Locke calls them) come from the Barnes Foundation.

The New Negro, a collection of short stories, poems, essays, and illustrations, further demonstrated the growing importance of the visual arts in African American culture, which up to that moment had lacked any real distinction. In this work, Locke again stressed the need to establish African American tradition in visual arts not only through the imagery here presented but also through theoretical considerations. In both cases Africanism as a concept was at the core. The Africanism of *The New Negro* does not rely solely on "Ethiopian" or "Egyptian" fantasies dominant in previous manifestations of African American visual art, such as in the previously mentioned sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller. Now, the imagery would be based on a more ethnographic approach and represent particular West African cultural traditions.

The re-discovery of African art by African Americans was possible thanks to the growing interest in "tribal" art in Europe, and then eventually in the United States. Art critics were starting to notice that the so-called "primitive" art had, as Locke noted above, a significant impact on the development of modern art at the beginning of the twentieth century. The discovery of "primitive" art dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century when art historians and anthropologists focused on the "decorative" elements and patterns, which resulted in instituting ethnographic collections. Needless to say that all these artifacts had been plundered from so-called "primitive societies". These "primitive", "savage" artifacts completely opposed the prevalent canon of the academia founded on "classicism inherited from the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome"[26] and appealed strongly to a generation that looked into the future. These "primitive" works "possessed precisely what European art seemed to have lost in the long pursuit – intense expressiveness, clarity of structure and a forthright simplicity of technique."[27] Avant-garde artists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, to name the most prominent, collected "tribal" art and were inspired by the "barbarian" which was referred to as *l'art negre, Negerkunst*, or "black art". Speculations were made as to whether one or another of Picasso's masks or fetishes had found their way onto his canvases, in particular onto *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in which one of the figures appears to be wearing an African mask. In spite of

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[25] The New Negro, p. 258

[26] Douglas Newton in the introduction to Berenice Geoffrey-Schneiter (2000 : 8, 23).

[27] E. Gombrich (1995 : 563).

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the opinions of Daniel Henry Kahnwiller, who dismissed the "Negro influence" in the rise of cubism and of Pierre Daix, who claimed that "there is no 'Negro' in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* "[28] it seems that the influence of African tribal art in this painting and others is self-evident.

Like his colleagues in Europe, Aaron Douglas was one of the African American visual artists who began to experiment with African motifs, basing his work on the graphic and sculptural expression of the black continent. He realized that only by following Locke's aesthetic guidelines could he reach artistic integrity as an African American artist. In most cases Douglas's illustrations and drawings were interpretations of Africanism in its pure form, frequently utilizing "Ethiopian" or "Egyptian" fantasies. Douglas's poster in the May, 1926 issue of *The Crisis* featuring the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theater of Harlem is packed with African imagery. The poster is a black and white illustration which presents a sitting figure in a cross-legged position, face turned to the side in profile. The African hair style and exaggerated thick lips leave no doubt as to the ethnic origin of the figure. The large hoop earring, stylized plants and flowers, the African mask, the pyramids and the sphinx, the wavy patterns – all demonstrate African visual inspiration. Besides the African imagery, the illustration also echoes Art Deco and Art Nouveau influences, especially in design motifs. Generalizing, we may state that it was an attempt to fuse modernist aesthetics with African ancestral iconography.

Douglas, Hughes, Hurston, and in a sense also Locke and Garvey, just like many other artists, intellectuals, and social activists of the time, drew inspiration, both as a source of artistic imagery and, perhaps more significantly, identity from the African motherland. Although in most cases it was an imagined land, symbolically it offered a necessary sense of belonging, heritage, and pride. Paraphrasing Countee Cullen's question "What was Africa to the Harlem Renaissance artists?", it may be repeated that although Africa was a vague concept, a mythical dimension, it became a central metaphor in the shaping of African American identity and race consciousness, and had a profound influence on the artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance.

To stretch the argument a little beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to address the question "What is Africa to you?" to contemporary African American rap, hip hop, or graffiti artists and compare the answers with those of the 1920s. The result has the potential to be inspiring, depressing, or at least disquieting.

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[28] Both are quoted in Y.-A. Bois (1990 : 69).

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