

**THE EARLY STRUGGLE OF BLACK INTERNATIONALISM:  
INTELLECTUAL INTERCHANGES AMONG AMERICAN AND FRENCH  
BLACK WRITERS DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

by  
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## DECLARATION

I confirm that this thesis is the result of my own work.

I confirm that I have indicated when information derived from other sources have been used.

This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Oxford, or at any other university.

Gaetan Maret

*To Alexa Weik von Mossner*

*Reprendre sans répit ce que depuis toujours vous avez  
dit. Consentir à l'élan infinitésimal, à l'ajout, inaperçu  
peut-être, qui dans votre savoir s'obstinent.*

\*\*\*

*To start again without respite what you have always  
said. To consent to the infinitesimal surge, to the  
addition, maybe unnoticed, which in your knowledge  
persists.*

(Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, 57)

## CONTENT

Declaration	i
Content	iv
Acknowledgements	v
A Note on Translation – Abbreviations – Some Notes on Terminology	ix
Abstract	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The African American Reception of René Maran’s <i>Batouala</i>	32
Chapter 2 Alain Locke’s <i>The New Negro</i> : Locating the African American Community	65
Chapter 3 Reconfiguring the Geography of the Race: Parisian Black Periodicals from <i>Les Continents</i> to <i>La Revue du Monde Noir</i>	97
Chapter 4 Black Vagabond Cosmopolitanism in Claude McKay’s <i>Banjo</i>	131
Chapter 5 The African American Detour of Early Négritude: from <i>Légitime Défense</i> to Césaire’s <i>Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal</i>	162
Conclusion	202
Bibliography	211

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## A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from French to English are my own.

## ABBREVIATIONS

I use several collections of complete/collected poems (Langston Hughes's *Collected Poems*, Claude McKay's *Complete Poems*, Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Poésie Complète*, and Sterling A. Brown's *Collected Poems*). For practical reasons, it will be abbreviated in parenthesis after the quotations as *PC* or *CP*.

## SOME NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the thesis, I will use the word "America" and its derivatives in order to designate the United States. This semantic choice does not disregard the debates about the Americas and U.S. appropriation of the term in its singular form. It rather attempts to reflect the prevailing terminology in use during the period under consideration. At the beginning of her introduction to *Terrible Honesty* (1995), Ann Douglas explains the terminological change which took place during the interwar period:

At home and abroad, in the 1920s, the nation was usually referred to not as the 'United States' but as 'America.' The term the 'United States' admits to possible divisions among separate parts of the national self; this relatively modest title did not come into wide circulation until the 1930s . . . Americans in the 1920s liked the term 'America' precisely for its imperial suggestion of an intoxicating and irresistible identity windswept into coherence by the momentum of destiny (3).

Since the present study cover the two decades of the interwar, we will use both terms interchangeably, trying to convey nonetheless the nuances expressed in these lines whenever it is possible.

The word 'identity' is used throughout the thesis to describe the belief in a fixed racial personality. This choice stems from the need to underline an essentialist vision of the race

which was common at the time and which pervades the works under consideration in this work. The choice of other terms—‘identification,’ ‘categorization,’ ‘self-understanding,’ ‘commonality,’ ‘social positioning,’ and so on—is meant to convey the nuances expressed by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper in their article, “Beyond Identity” (2000).

## ABSTRACT

The thesis focuses on the interchanges which took place during the interwar period between the American and the French black communities. It explores the role of national and transnational frames of reference in the definition of the New Negro movement during the 1920s as well as in its reception by French black intellectuals during the 1930s. Black internationalism during the interwar period can be seen as a circuit of interconnections which resulted in multifaceted and shifting identifications encompassing national and transnational affiliations as well as, sometimes, a cosmopolitan sense of belonging. My work explores the difficulties and successes that the writers under consideration encountered at the time in their attempts to communicate with fellow black people across socio-cultural boundaries.

Although, during the interwar period, the perspective shifted from a preeminence of local paradigms to an emphasis on diasporic views of the black race, the national and the transnational, understood as sites of social positioning, cultural self-definition, and political agency, remained inextricably intermingled. All the examples presented in the thesis show that literature, often understood as a national category, does not exist in a vacuum. It is constantly formed and informed through transnational exchanges. The American Harlem Renaissance depended on external sources of inspiration to come to existence. Not restricted to the United States, it then spread across territorialized borders and, in turn, affected the French black community, becoming a major influence in the emergence of Négritude. The thesis successively explores five defining instances of black internationalism: René Maran's *Batouala* (1921), Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), black Parisian newspapers from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1928), and the early theorization of Négritude. Through the use of Glissant's notion of detour, theorized in *Le Discours antillais*

(1981), this thesis frames 'black internationalism' as a shifting web of negotiations expanding between national and transnational spaces.

## Introduction

“Meeting now with this common American background, all of them may yet retain that distinctiveness of their native cultures and their national spiritual slants. They are more valuable and interesting to each other for being different, yet that difference could not be creative were it not for this new cosmopolitan outlook which America has given them and which they all equally possess” (Randolph S. Bourne, “Trans-National America,” 118).

Commenting on the years immediately following World War I, in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995), George Hutchinson affirms that “the myth of American national identity as a unitary, self-contained sphere was never so open to question” (11). The war in Europe, the economic changes resulting from the rise of corporate capitalism, and, more importantly, late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century waves of immigration heightened the debates around national identity and intensified discussions about the cohesion of the American nation. In spite of the fact that the United States has always been a heterogeneous assemblage of populations, its cohesion as a socio-political construct seemed to be in jeopardy. Between 1880 and 1924, with the transition from a flow of migration coming from northern Europe to another one originating from eastern and southeastern Europe, the question of the migrants’ impact on America became central to the conversation on national identity.<sup>1</sup> Assimilative policies were frequently challenged during the first decades of the twentieth century. Proponents of swift integration argued that immigrants should forsake their former traditions and customs in order to fit the American mold. This process, known as ‘Americanization,’ would ensure the homogeneity of the national population.<sup>2</sup> Several intellectuals nevertheless cast doubt on its relevance and

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<sup>1</sup> For a general overview of the debates about American identities and immigration, both before, during, and after the war, see, among many others, Orm Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, America Identities* (2000); Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism* (2003); Susan F. Martin, *A Nation of Immigrants* (2011); Robert L. Fleegler, *Ellis Island Nation* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> In 1919, a survey on the Americanization movement, compiled by Howard C. Hill, gives the following definition of the term: “a process by which an alien acquires our language, citizenship, customs, and ideals”

efficiency for dealing with what many considered at the time a turning point in the development of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

In July 1916, in an essay significantly titled “Trans-National America,” Randolph S. Bourne attested to “the failure of Americanization.” He pejoratively described the assimilative process as “Anglo-Saxonizing,” implying that the immigrants had to forsake their former allegiances in order to embrace a fixed American identity (108). He observed that the process of integration into American culture had the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the newcomers’ attachment to the countries they left to cross the Atlantic and start a new life: “assimilation, in other words, instead of washing out the memories of Europe, made them more and more intensely real” (Sundquist 108).<sup>4</sup> Instead of embracing the Anglo-Saxon culture of the ruling class, the recently settled populations strove to preserve the traditions imported from their European homelands. Since they did not display a strong American identity, immigrants were designated as ‘foreigners’ through the use of hyphenated denominations. Orm Øverland opens the prologue of *Immigrant Minds, American Identities* (2000) with a reflection on the use of this term in the American language. Although not recorded in dictionaries as such, he claims that the word could be, and has been in practice, defined as “an American or a resident in the United States who is not of British origin” (1). To adopt American culture, defined as an outgrowth of the traditions brought to New England by the British colonists, was a prerequisite for settling in to the United States. Echoing the perspective of Americanization’s

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(631) – see also, Martin, *A Nation of Immigrants*, 122-131; James R. Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up,” 996-1004.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Lost Promise of Patriotism*, Hansen examines the works of several intellectuals who “challenged Anglo-American assumptions about the meaning of American identity” (xv). William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams, Eugene V. Debs, W. E. B. Du Bois, Randolph Bourne, Louis Brandeis, and Horace Kallen, according to Hansen, “maintained a critical tension between local, national, and international affiliations” (xiv-xv) – For another type of resistance to institutional ‘Americanization,’ understood as the imposition of Anglo-American values on the migrants, see Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up” (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis, unless otherwise indicated, the quotations from Du Bois’s essays and works are excerpted from Sundquist’s *Reader* (1996).

advocates, Bourne ironically implied that hybrid identities could pose a threat to the consistency of the United States as an integral nation.

In fact, the essay condemned the tendency to impose British-inherited culture as an imperative condition to participate in the life of the nation and be considered truly American—without a hyphen: “we have insisted that the immigrant whom we welcome escaping from the very exclusive nationalism of his European home shall forthwith adopt a nationalism just as exclusive, just as narrow.” Instead, he put forward a model of cosmopolitanism founded on the “dual citizenship” of the individuals who formed the nation’s population (119-20).<sup>5</sup> Hyphenated identifications should not be seen as signs of exclusion, he argued, but recognized as valuable features which could benefit the population of the United States as a whole. Making reference to the derogatory gaze of the dominant class, Bourne spoke of the “hyphen stigma.” He claimed that, seen as a negatively connoted demarcation, it should be applied precisely “to those English descendants who had centuries of time to be made American,” but remained attached to British culture (111). By the end of the essay, it has become clear to the readers that Bourne considered the multinational outlook provided by the migrant populations as a positive dimension of the nation’s composition.

Rather than seeing the diversity of immigrants’ nationalities as a menace to the coherence of America as a nation, Bourne presented it as an asset for the future of the country. Transcending the narrow nationalisms of Europe, he explained, Americans were going to instigate international channels of intellectual interchanges between the United States and the incoming migrants’ countries of origin: “America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, *a weaving back and forth*, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes

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<sup>5</sup> Bourne’s idea of cosmopolitanism echoes Kwame Anthony Appiah’s ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ as defined in the last chapter *The Ethics of Identity* (2005). In this thesis, we will adopt Appiah’s perspective when talking about ‘cosmopolitanism’ – see also, Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Patriots” (1997) and *Cosmopolitanism* (2008), and Nussbaum’s “Toward a Globally Sensitive Patriotism” (2008).

and colors.”<sup>6</sup> Connected to a planetary network of interrelations, the American individual—not defined as a citizen, but rather as someone who grasped and appropriated “the pioneer spirit and a sense of new social vistas”—could become a “citizen of the world” (121). This cosmopolitan ideal would ultimately transcend traditional European nationalisms. It would permit the United States to become the first transnational nation in the world.

This thesis explores the ‘weaving back and forth’ which informed the intellectual production and the international reception of another hyphenated group that Bourne did not include in his observations, namely African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Of course, the lived experiences of black people in the United States were quite different from the European migrants’ daily existences. Anti-black racism—institutionalized or not—defined and regulated every aspect of social life. Even in the northern part of the country, allegedly more tolerant of racial differences, prejudices against black people formed the backdrop of everyday interactions. In May 1919, in a *Crisis* editorial titled “Returning Soldiers,” W. E. B. Du Bois summarized the situation and denounced “the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disfranchisement, caste, brutality, and devilish insult” (380). A few months later, the riots of the Red Summer would illustrate the omnipresence of racism in the United States and remind African Americans of the threat it could pose to their physical integrity.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the immediate violence of racial hatred, black people had to face a more subtle, yet no less pernicious, form of alienation.

Edouard Glissant theorizes this alienation at the beginning of *Le Discours antillais* (1981) when he mentions “une *coupure* béante, irréversible (d’avec la terre originelle

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<sup>6</sup> My italics.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Hutchinson suggests that Bourne might have become interested in African Americans if he had lived longer. He unfortunately died prematurely in December 1918. See, Hutchinson 102-105.

<sup>8</sup> Claude McKay’s poem, “If We Must Die,” composed at the time, pondered on this harsh reality – see McKay, *CP* 177-78.

d’Afrique)” (26).<sup>9</sup> The trauma of the Middle Passage followed by centuries of slavery created an insuperable abyss which irretrievably cut off African Americans from their ancestral continent.<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of *Introduction à une poétique du Divers* (1996), Edouard Glissant makes a crucial distinction between three types of migrant group which populated the Americas: “le ‘migrant armé’,” “le ‘migrant domestique’,” and “le ‘migrant nu’” (14).<sup>11</sup> The first settlers, defined by the fact that they are carrying weapons, perform the acts of the colonizers that Elleke Boehmer defines, in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2005) as “the settlement of the territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force” (2). In the United States, they would mainly be represented by populations of British origins. The second group is characterized by a strong connection to the homeland they have left behind. It brings to his new location the customs and traditions which informed its former life. The waves of European immigrants would belong to this category. Finally, the ‘naked migrants’ are those who have been forcefully displaced and who experienced a rupture with the land of origin. African Americans, severed from their linguistic and cultural roots, must cope with the alienating effects of this irremediable break.

Some of the challenges that the black community had to face in the United States could nonetheless be regarded as similar to the difficulties encountered by the European newcomers. In fact, to acknowledge the common traits of the two groups’ lived experience was a strategy implemented by black leaders such as Du Bois in their attempts to secure civil

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<sup>9</sup> Italics in the original – For practical reasons, I will use the 1997 Gallimard edition of *Le Discours antillais*. In the footnote, I will use John Michael Dash’s 1989 translation of the work. Since some translational choices are problematic, I will sometimes add additional explanations and, when needed, alternative translations. In this passage, Dash does not directly translate the expression ‘coupure béante.’ He rather speaks of the Antillean people, “violently and irrevocably severed from the motherland” (9). Glissant’s ‘coupure béante’ both suggests a ‘gaping wound’ and an ‘irremediable break.’

<sup>10</sup> The opening chapter of Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), titled “La Barque ouverte,” meditates on the Middle Passage. According to Glissant, the philosophy of the Relation, which forms the center of his theories, stems from the absolute dispossession experienced by the displaced populations (20-21).

<sup>11</sup> The ‘armed migrant,’ the ‘domestic migrant,’ and the ‘naked migrant.’

rights and social equality for black people. In his essay titled “Americanization,” for example, which was published in the *Crisis* issue of August 24, 1922, he describes an exclusive process which only focuses on one possible source of identity for people living in America:

As a matter of fact what the powerful and the privileged mean by Americanization is the determination to make the English New England stock dominant in the United States it is but a renewal of the Anglo-Saxon cult; the worship of the Nordic totem, the disfranchisement of Negro, Jew, Irishman, Italian, Hungarian, Asiatic and South Sea islander—the world rule of Nordic white through brute force” (383-84).

Echoing Bourne’s critique of assimilative practices, Du Bois puts on equal footing foreign migrants and American black people while denouncing the belief in a single American identity. The black population of the United States wanted to blend into the life of the nation, but had to face the dilemma between assimilation, at the cost of their racial specificity, or exclusion. Like European immigrants, they attempted to safeguard what they considered their cultural heritage through interchanges which went beyond the American territory. In the eighth chapter of *Terrible Honesty* (1995), in a subsection significantly titled “The Negro and the Immigrant,” Ann Douglas underlines the similarity between the struggle of black Americans and the problems of the newcomers. She notes that both groups were “if not allies, victims of a common prejudice” (307).<sup>12</sup> However, rather than keeping contacts with the old world, as the new migrants would, black Americans connected with a diasporic community linked by a shared history and a common origin. They progressively realized that contacts across boundaries among people of African descent could encourage a sense of racial identity and self-respect which would, in turn, help black people to find their way to racial emancipation.

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<sup>12</sup> In *Imagining the Primitive* (2006), Gina M. Rossetti dedicates individual chapters to “The Primitive as the Immigrant” and “The Primitive as the Racial Exotic” without explicitly drawing a parallel between these types of representation.

The interchanges which took place during the interwar period between the American and the French black communities will be the point of focus of the thesis.<sup>13</sup> Using Glissant's notion of detour, as defined in *Le Discours antillais*, I will show the equally important role of national and transnational spaces in the definition of the New Negro movement during the 1920s as well as in its reception by French black intellectuals during the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> Black internationalism during the interwar period could be seen as a circuit of interconnections which resulted in multifaceted and shifting identifications encompassing national and transnational affiliations as well as, sometimes, a cosmopolitan sense of belonging. In *From Harlem to Paris* (1991), Michel Fabre masterfully demonstrates the formative impact of the French capital on generations of African American writers throughout the twentieth century. He also connects the Harlem Renaissance to the Négritude movement in his article, "Rene Maran, the New Negro and Negritude" (1975).<sup>15</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) proposes a model of diasporic connections through the notion of 'décalage,' that he defines as "what resists or escapes translation" (13). His purpose is to stress the misapprehensions and misunderstanding that inevitably occur in the international conversations which take place in a diasporic context.<sup>16</sup> Chidi Ikonné explores further these interchanges in *Links and Bridges* (2005). His analysis leads him to conclude that, in spite of the numerous instances of transatlantic contacts between the American and French black

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<sup>13</sup> I am using the terms 'French' and 'American' to express a sense of belonging rather than a citizenship status. All the writers under consideration in the thesis considered themselves French or American even though they were not always in possession a French or an American passport. For example, Léopold Sédar Senghor acquired French nationality in 1932 and Claude McKay became a US citizen as late as 1940.

<sup>14</sup> I will propose a detailed analysis of Glissant's concept later in the introduction.

<sup>15</sup> For a similar approach, see also, F. Abiola Irele, "Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism" (1965), and "The Harlem Renaissance and the Negitude Movement" (2004); J. Ayo Langley, "Pan-Africanism in Paris, 1924-1936" (1969); Willfried F. Feuser, "Afro-American Literature and Negritude" (1976).

<sup>16</sup> In his essay published in *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993), Kenneth Warren places the notion of 'misrecognition' at the center of diasporic encounters. Although Warren emphasizes a subject's multiple identifications, rather than dialogical exchanges of ideas between individuals and intellectual movements, as a site of misrepresentation, his focus on the inability to communicate efficiently across borders concurs with Edwards's conception of the diaspora.

communities, the two movements “had the potentiality for parallel and independent development” (257).<sup>17</sup> Indebted to these interpretations, my work aims to reassess the role of international and national frames of reference in the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement. It explores the difficulties and successes that the writers under consideration encountered at the time in their attempts to communicate with fellow black people from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

Following in the footsteps of Elleke Boehmer, in *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial* (2005), this thesis challenges a widely accepted presumption, in today’s scholarship, that “in a multinationally organized world the nation as a historical and political entity has been practically transcended as well as exhaustively treated as a subject of investigation” (7). Whereas the scholars quoted above principally stressed the international dimension of these interchanges, I believe that it is also crucial to underline the importance of national spaces in the attempt to construct international networks. In working out the confluences as well as the contradictions between the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement, this thesis explores the black American literary production of the period through its reception of black French texts and its impact on the subsequent debates in France and articulates it as a complex web of negotiations between national and international spaces.

### **W. E. B. Du Bois, the Negro Question and the Color-line**

At the beginning of the seventh chapter of *Through Other Continents* (2006), Wai Chee Dimock bluntly asks the question that hovers behind an important part of the scholarship on black American literature: “is African American literature national or is it diasporic?” (142). Studies of the Harlem Renaissance have been divided along two lines of

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<sup>17</sup> Mercer A. Cook already hinted at the possibility of parallel development in his contribution to *The Black Writer in Africa and the Americas* (1973).

thought. On the one hand, scholars such as Nathan Irvin Huggins, David Levering Lewis, Houston A. Baker, Jr., and George Hutchinson have mainly studied the Harlem Renaissance from an American perspective.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Michel Fabre, Chidi Ikonné, and Brent Hayes Edwards, among others, confirmed in their works the importance of transnational spaces—especially the Franco-American paradigm which is at the center of this thesis—for the understanding of black American literary production.<sup>19</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (2007) exposes in its very first part the tension between the national and the international dimension of the movement: Jeffrey C. Stewart’s “The Negro as Citizen” precedes an article written by Michael A. Chaney, titled “The International Contexts of the Negro Renaissance.” The discussion around these questions sometimes appears to be caught in a dilemma where the terms ‘national’ and ‘international’ are presented as necessarily contradictory concepts.<sup>20</sup>

However, it would be erroneous to assume that these two distinct approaches are always mutually exclusive. The work of Du Bois provides ample evidence that black intellectuals were preoccupied by domestic debates as well as by international issues. In “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind” (1900), Du Bois hints at the resilience of these apparently contradicting spaces of intervention when he frames the Negro problem in America as the incipient stage of a larger movement of emancipation:

It is but natural for us to consider that our race question is a purely national and local affair, confined to nine million Americans and settled when their rights and opportunities are assured, and yet a glance over the world at the dawn of the new century will convince us that this is but the beginning of the problem—that the color line belts the world and that the social problem of the twentieth century is to be the relation of the civilized world to the dark races of mankind (47-48).

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<sup>18</sup> See, Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (1971); Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981); Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987); Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*.

<sup>19</sup> For explorations of other transnational networks, see Marc Matera, “Black Internationalism and African and Caribbean Intellectuals in London” (2008), and Minkah Makalani, “Diaspora and the Localities of Race” (2009) and *In the Cause of Freedom* (2011).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars* (2003).

This statement echoes the address “To the Nations of the World” where, a few months earlier, Du Bois had succinctly made his point by famously affirming that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line” (625).<sup>21</sup> In “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind,” however, Du Bois complicates the issue at two important levels. First, he underlines the tension between a legitimate desire to attend to local necessities, and the awareness of the problem’s global dimensions. Concerns limited to the national territory seem to conflict with, or to flow into, transnational spaces defined on a planetary scale. Secondly, Du Bois does not only present the American situation as a part of a global racial issue, he defines it as a prelude to the history of the twentieth century: it is only ‘the beginning of the problem.’ The representation of African Americans as the vanguard of black peoples across the globe would play a considerable role in the interchanges under scrutiny in this thesis, both for black Americans’ self-definition and their relationship to other people of African descent, and for the reception of their ideas among black French intellectuals.

Starting from the observation of the black American community, or ‘the Negro question,’ Du Bois enlarges the picture in order to describe an issue that he considers global and that he describes as ‘the color-line.’ He displays his awareness of the worldwide dimension of the problem in essays such as “Africa and the Slave Trade” (1915), “Manifesto of the Second Pan-African Congress” (1921), and “The Negro Mind Reaches Out” (1925). However, until the late 1940s, the African American group remained at the center of his preoccupations as he tried to define its place and ponders on its role, both on a national and an international scale.<sup>22</sup> In his essay entitled “Of Horizon” (2010), Nahum D. Chandler underlines the fact that, for Du Bois, “the fundamental problem was to elucidate the terms on

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<sup>21</sup> Edwards has noted in *The Practice of Diaspora* that the sentence “would reverberate three years later in the famous ‘Forethought’ to Du Bois’s masterwork, *The Souls of Black Folks*” (1).

<sup>22</sup> The section titled “Politics, Economics, and Education,” in Sundquist’s *Reader*, attests to this primary interest.

which this ostensible group could be understood to enter historicity: as part of the project of America, as part of the making of the modern world” (3).<sup>23</sup> The ‘Negro question’ cannot be solved only on one level. It is rather through a ‘weaving back and forth’ between two planes of intervention—the national and the international—that the difficulties can be handled and ultimately solved. Du Bois’s work at the NAACP and his involvement in the Pan-African movements attest to his belief in the necessity to work through different, yet not necessarily oppositional, spaces.

The tension between national ambitions and attempts to conceptualize a ‘black internationalism,’ which forms the center of this thesis, can also be grasped through Du Bois’s notion of ‘double-consciousness,’ a concept which he developed at the turn of the century and which was clearly articulated for the first time in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).<sup>24</sup> The passage which presents the definition of the term, excerpted from the first chapter of Du Bois’s masterwork, has often been cited. Interpretations about its significance range across several disciplines and methodologies.<sup>25</sup> It nevertheless seems necessary to quote it again here in order to understand its relevance and usefulness within the frame of this study:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (102).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See also, Chandler’s Introduction to *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (2015), 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> In “Of Horizon,” Chandler has demonstrated that the question of ‘double-consciousness’ is already present in Du Bois’s earliest unpublished essay, “The Afro-American” (6-7). The text of this early essay has now been published for the first time in a collection of Du Bois’ essays – see *The Problem of the Color Line*, 33-50.

<sup>25</sup> See, among many others, Bruce D. Dickson, Jr., “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness” (1992); Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices* (1994), chap. 4; Adolph L. Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought* (1997), chap. 7; Ernest Allen, Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness” (2002); T. Owens Moore, “A Fanonian Perspective on Double Consciousness” (2005); Vilashini Cooppan, “The Double Politics of Double Consciousness” (2005); Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (2009), chap. 2; Frank M. Kirkland, “On Du Bois’ Notion of Double Consciousness” (2013).

<sup>26</sup> For practical reasons, quotes from *The Souls of Black Folk* are also taken from Sundquist’s *Reader*. Among the many available editions of the text, I would recommend, among others, the 2007 Oxford University Press edition with an introduction by Edwards, which is presented in the bibliography.

In his detailed analysis of this paragraph, Ernest Allen, Jr., rightly asserts that the definition comprises “a juxtaposition of two modes of purported psychic turmoil” (227). Du Bois places side by side two types of difficulties that African Americans have to face in their everyday life. The first one results from external factors whereas the second one concerns a struggle inherent to black American individuals’ self-understanding.

On the one hand, Du Bois delineates a construction of identity taking place under, and conditioned by, the gaze of the dominant group. African Americans internalize the racial stereotypes pervading the society in which they live. These demeaning representations confine them to a set of predetermined types which mark out possible identifications, and prevent new associations and affiliations. On the other hand, Du Bois acknowledges the existence of an inner conflict which burdens people excluded from the civic life of the country where they were born. African Americans are torn between two possible identifications—‘an American; a Negro.’ Caught in this dilemma, they cannot choose either of these designations as a single identity without forsaking a part of their self. There seems to be no possibility of reconciliation between two terms that have been defined in contradistinction to each other. According to Du Bois, the violence of the struggle between these conflicting terms pushes black people to the verge of collapse, both physically and mentally.

This quandary would preoccupy Du Bois during the interwar period. In September 1933, in an essay published in *The Crisis* and titled “On Being Ashamed of Oneself: an Essay on Race Pride,” he sums up once more the situation by stressing the “dilemma between rights of American citizens and racial pride,” which African Americans have to face (74).<sup>27</sup> The dichotomy is not only located between antithetical connections to different geographical spaces, as the term ‘Afro-American’ seems to suggest. It does not either reside solely in an

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<sup>27</sup> This quotation contradicts Allen’s claim that Du Bois did not elaborate his concept after 1903. Although Du Bois may not have used the term ‘double-consciousness’ in subsequent texts, the division and struggle he is describing in *The Souls of Black Folk* remains present in his thought during the interwar period.

opposition between incompatible conceptions of culture, understood as artistic and intellectual production, and of aesthetic judgement. The friction also appears between the rights and duties inherent to civic life and the sense of belonging to a race that has been stripped of its claims to citizenship and of the privileges attached to it. African Americans have to confront the oppression and rejection of their race around the world at the same time as they need to assert the rights inherent to their specific location in the United States. Du Bois solves the problem, as Vilashini Cooppan suggests, by circumventing the dilemma he is facing: “double consciousness presents—and this is its peculiar ontological strength—a state of being defined by the refusal to choose between opposed identities” (304). The concept’s purpose, which is clarified in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, is “to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American” (102). Racial consciousness, which inevitably reaches beyond the confines of national boundaries, should be compatible with an affiliation to the American nation. Du Bois enjoins his fellow black Americans to preserve, to use Bourne’s words quoted in the epigraph, the ‘distinctiveness of their native cultures’ while meeting with fellow citizens on the ‘common American background’ of civic life.

In “The Conservation of Races” (1897), an address presented at the inaugural session of the American Negro Academy, Du Bois lays down the concept as a series of questions which should haunt any black person “who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America”:

What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates black and white America? Is not my only practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black blood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian would? (43).

The terms of the issue are presented as a set of interrogations and choices which keeps troubling black American intellectuals and artists.<sup>28</sup> Ranging from an existential inquiry to a pragmatic reflection on social positioning, these questions articulate the complexity of a situation where identifications have to be negotiated along apparently diverging lines of self-understanding. The last query, however, brings the debate from the personal to the communal. Comparing black Americans to other immigrants living in the United States, Du Bois wonders about the bearing of their racial belonging on their assimilative endeavor. He chooses to place black American individuals on the same level as European migrants without taking into account the experiences of forced displacement and slavery which brought black people to America. By drawing a parallel between the African American community and other hyphenated groups, he inserts the notion of double-consciousness at the heart of the debates on American national identity. He seems to echo Bourne's call for a transnational America expressed through the concept of 'dual citizenship.'

Unlike other hyphenated designations, however, to identify oneself as African-American does not necessarily imply a double national affiliation. It means to relate, on the one hand, to the American nation, while affirming a connection with a much more extensive community: the black race. Such a denomination is located astride national and racial, that is to say transnational, frames of reference. While the nation, as a category of self-understanding, could seem self-evident in the aftermath of World War I, the idea of race was not an equally consistent term.<sup>29</sup> The specter of scientific racism hovered above talks of racial difference during the two decades of the interwar period. In the introduction to *The Retreat of*

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<sup>28</sup> Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness seems mainly to concern the higher strata of the African American community, which he calls, in an essay published in 1903, the 'Talented Tenth' – see chap. 1, 39-40.

<sup>29</sup> In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Eric J. Hobsbawm designates the interwar period as "the apogee of nationalism" (131-32). Although the fifth chapter of this masterwork underlines the difficulties that the idea of nation and its political implications posed during the period, Hobsbawm notes that the theory of "the necessary identification of the members of a nationality with the territorial state that claim to embody it . . . was now gaining ground rapidly" (134-35). To refer to a national space as constituent of one's identity seemed a natural gesture to the majority of people living in the great western nations.

*Scientific Racism* (1992), Elazar Barkan notes that, at the time, “race was perceived primarily as a scientific concept, a perception which was itself a legacy of the nineteenth century.” He immediately adds that, “racial theories which constructed a hierarchy of races with the Nordic at the top were considered factual, free of prejudice and generally pertinent to social and political analysis” (1-2).<sup>30</sup> Black intellectuals of the interwar period were not immune to these pseudo-scientific categorizations.<sup>31</sup> They had to redefine the category of ‘race’ at the same time as they inhabited it as an identity marker. They had to resist and subvert a form of knowledge considered as established; they had to counter demeaning stereotypes and create positive images of blackness. An important element of the discourse on race during the interwar period was the Negro vogue which swept the United States and France.<sup>32</sup> The craze for exoticism that took over cities like New York and Paris provided opportunities for black artists and intellectuals.<sup>33</sup> Primitivism, understood as a stereotyped vision of blackness informing a certain type of representation, was used to challenge western beliefs and values. In *Imagining the Primitive* (2006), Gina M. Rossetti explains that “white and African American authors fetishize the racial to open up a space that is outside of mainstream culture” (149).<sup>34</sup> In the aftermath of World War I, the need to find alternatives to the ever-increasing standardization of society seemed to reach a climax. Black people, depicted as insouciant and spontaneous individuals, allegedly proposed a way of life which contrasted with the restraint

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<sup>30</sup> It is useful to remember at this point the publication of Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1918) and of Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920). These works were based on scientific racism. The problems they tackled attest to the anxieties that the question of race could provoke at the time. The work of Franz Boas, among many others, formed part of a counterdiscourse which developed at the time.

<sup>31</sup> The early writings of Du Bois, for example, bear witness to the influence of such a discourse – see, for example, Du Bois, “The Conservation of the Races” 39-41.

<sup>32</sup> The expression ‘Negro vogue’ comes from Langston Hughes’s first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), in which he claims, describing the 1920s in New York, that “it was the period when the Negro was in vogue” (228). David Levering Lewis’s title, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981), constitutes a direct reference to it – see also, Emily Bernard, “The Renaissance and the Vogue” (2007).

<sup>33</sup> Petrine Archer Straw designates the Parisian vogue as “Negrophilia” – see Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (2000).

<sup>34</sup> See also, Michael North, *Dialect of Modernism* (1994); Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism* (1998).

and inhibition imposed by restrictive codes of behavior. Originating from an uncivilized land, they had kept their atavistic characteristics: they were the emotional counterpart to the over-rational mind of white people. The fact that they were seen both as closer to nature and less sophisticated reinforced the idea that their primitive qualities could be the remedy to the moral and intellectual desiccation of occidental civilization.

African American writers were aware of the double-edged nature of the discourse on race and primitivism. In his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, Michael A. Cheney brilliantly summarizes the dilemma that the black intellectuals and artists had to face when confronted with their transatlantic origins: “On the one hand Africa was the exotic ‘dark continent,’ a land awash in a primitive culture that some elite artists and white philanthropists opposed to the desiccated exhaustion of western modernity. On the other hand, that same primal culture was to many African Americans a mark of shame, supposedly both anterior and inferior to European traditions” (52).<sup>35</sup> Seen through the lens of primitivist discourse, the ancestral continent was the source of the atavistic vitality which would save the western world. At the same time, for many people in the United States—white as well as black, Africa was synonymous with backwardness and barbarism. In *Links and Bridges*, Ikonné affirms that “this ambivalence *vis-à-vis* Africa . . . ran through the whole gamut of the Harlem Renaissance literary expression” (71). Although Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness did not completely wash away the ambiguity towards the land of origin, it allowed African American writers and intellectuals to present themselves as the inheritors of African culture at the same time as they could position themselves as modern Americans. The ancestral continent would then be constructed as a site for the production of empowering representations of the race.

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<sup>35</sup> See also, Amritjit Singh, “Black-White Symbiosis: Another Look at the Literary History of the 1920s.”

Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness remains nevertheless centered on an American paradigm. The concept is not entirely restricted to the national scenery since it acknowledges an African influence. The transnational dimension, which is a constituent part of the concept, is to be understood, as in the case of Bourne's 'dual citizenship,' as a welcoming of an external contribution to the American nation, which persists as a focal point of analysis. Both Du Bois's and Bourne's concept can help understand, from a domestic point of view, the international impulses which inform the artistic creations and intellectual discussions taking place in the United States. Such a perspective can clarify the reception of other cultural elements—the negotiation of Africa's significance for black American identity, for example—within the United States. It does not allow for a projection of the African American impact abroad. Du Bois certainly entrusts African Americans with an important role in the emancipation of the black race. However, the form of transnationalism which he promotes consecrates the preeminence of black Americans and could be seen as a by-product of American exceptionalism.<sup>36</sup> Described as a paragon of resistance, the African American community would pass on a message of emancipation to the oppressed masses of people of African descent. Rather than a unidirectional impulse, spreading out from an American center to the fringes of the black world, 'black internationalism,' in this thesis, will be articulated as a web of interchanges between black communities situated on both sides of the Atlantic.

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<sup>36</sup> In 1946, in *The World and Africa*, Du Bois would reconsider his point of view: "American Negroes of former generations had always calculated that when Africa was ready for freedom, American Negroes would be ready to lead them. But the event was quite the opposite" (217) – see, Louis Henry Gates's Introduction to The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois series, xviii.

### **Black Internationalism and Edouard Glissant's Detour**

Transnational approaches emphasize the interdependence and interpenetration of the domestic sphere and foreign spaces.<sup>37</sup> African American artistic currents can then be perceived as being shaped by external influences and, simultaneously, as forming a constitutive element of intellectual movements abroad. In her introduction to *Through Other Continents*, Dimock argues that “rather than being a discrete entity,” American literature “is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures” (3). The need for external sources of inspiration resonates even more strongly in the African American literary tradition. The peripheral position of black people in American society forced them to find other locations where they could exist and gain self-confidence. Although Du Bois acknowledges cultural hybridity and recognizes the essential role of international connections, his idea of double-consciousness does not escape a territorialized paradigm of interpretation. It describes a state of hybridity—as does Bourne’s dual-citizenship—resulting from displacement, compelled or not, and disfranchisement. It certainly encompasses the ‘other geographies’ that Dimock mentions, but principally as modifiers of an American identity. It does not explore the ‘crisscrossing set of pathways’ which lead to the composite identities of black Americans.

A theoretical model which can account for the inner workings of these transnational conversations can be found at the beginning of Edouard Glissant’s *Le Discours antillais* (1981). In the twelfth chapter, the Martinican thinker observes the reactions of a population which has been forcefully removed from its geographical place of origin and which progressively realizes that it will not be possible to maintain its traditional customs on the site of exile. He makes a distinction between a people which manages to perpetuate its cultural

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<sup>37</sup> See, among others, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures” (2005); Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way, “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis” (2008); Laura Doyle, “Toward a Philosophy of Transnationalism” (2009); Donald E. Pease, “Re-mapping the Transnational Turn” (2011).

existence abroad and a population which is transformed, through compelled displacement, and becomes “une nouvelle donnée du monde” (40).<sup>38</sup> What Glissant intends to clarify is the “histoires entrecroisées” which lead to the emergence of a new socio-cultural paradigm (40).<sup>39</sup> He attends to transnational operations in which human beings, cultural artefacts, and ideas, travel from one place to another, being metamorphosed in the process, but also altering the location they reach. The notions of ‘retour,’ ‘mimésis,’ and ‘détour’ form the different stages which characterize these transformative processes.<sup>40</sup> They constitute useful analytical tools when attempting to unscramble the complex mechanisms of transnational interchanges.

The idea of return constitutes the initial drive of a people which has been compellingly displaced: “la première pulsion d’une population transplantée, qui n’est pas sûre de maintenir au lieu de son transbord l’ancien ordre de ses valeurs, est le Retour” (44).<sup>41</sup> Its primary cause lies in the exiled group’s fear not to have the possibility to perpetuate the practices which confer a coherence to its socio-cultural structure. Confronted with an inhospitable environment and facing adverse conditions, the community holds on to its roots and strives to maintain its cohesion. It is a strategy that aims at a refusal of alteration: “Le Retour est l’obsession de l’Un: il ne faut pas changer l’être. Revenir, c’est consacrer la permanence, la

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<sup>38</sup> “A new set of possibilities” (14) – Glissant’s text could be translated as ‘a new component of the world.’

<sup>39</sup> “the mingling of experiences” (14) – a more literal translation would render ‘histoire entrecroisées’ as ‘intertwined histories.’

<sup>40</sup> ‘Return,’ ‘mimesis,’ and ‘detour’ – Dash mostly uses the terms of ‘reversion’ and ‘diversion’ to refer respectively to Glissant’s ‘retour’ and ‘détour.’ In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards prefers the words ‘return’ and ‘detour’ which are closer to Glissant’s wording. Both the terms chosen by Edwards and those presented by Dash clarify the idea presented by the Martinican philosopher. ‘Return’ and ‘reversion’ hint at the evocation of a previous situation. Whereas ‘return’ seems to imply a movement in space, the notion of ‘reversion’ adds a temporal dimension to the action. ‘Detour’ and ‘diversion’ also suggest slightly different meanings. Whereas ‘detour’ implies that the goal remains the same in spite of the change in the means to reach it, ‘diversion’ underlines the fact that the strategy also aims at distracting the dominant group or at diverting the oppressed community. In this thesis, although, in the footnotes, I will quote Dash’s translation, I will mainly use the terms ‘return’ and ‘detour’ which seem closer to the French wording used by Glissant. The meaning of those terms however encompass the nuances expressed by Edward and Dash.

<sup>41</sup> “The first impulse of a transplanted population which is not sure of maintaining the old order of values in the transplanted locale is that of reversion” (16).

non-relation” (30).<sup>42</sup> The group, therefore, remains self-enclosed and avoids entering into a relation with its immediate surrounding. It does not attempt to develop external contacts which may threaten its consistency and uniformity. The purpose is to preserve the purity of the origins. This impulse finds its expression in a desire to go back to the ancestral traditions and customs, either physically by travelling back to the homeland or spiritually by attempting to preserve its memory in social and cultural practices.

The ‘Back-to-Africa’ movement, initiated by Marcus Garvey, was an example of the need for a physical return to the black continent. Africa was then understood as a geographical space that had to be reclaimed. According to Glissant, this kind of endeavor often results in the disquieting realization of the gap that separates oneself from the ancestral land: “Que penser du sort de ces gens qui reviennent en Afrique . . . *et qui ne sont plus des Africains?*” (45).<sup>43</sup> Going back physically often leads to bitter disillusionment.<sup>44</sup> For many African Americans, however, to return to the ancestral continent was seen as an initiatory journey to the land of origin; they only considered Africa as the homeland in symbolic terms. Africa is then imagined and idealized as an unchanging place where black people can find stability and a sense of cultural belonging. The Harlem Renaissance movement triggered a reappraisal of the African legacy, which had been somehow kept alive in the folk culture of the South. In France, the Négritude movement would, in turn, reassess the significance of the ancestral continent. Léopold Sédar Senghor, in particular, elaborated romanticized

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<sup>42</sup> “Return . . . is the obsession with the One: one must not alter being. To return is to consecrate permanence, non-relation” (Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 22) – Edwards, in the “Variations on a Preface,” limits his explanation of the ‘return’ to this quotation. Dash develops the idea of “non-relation” and translates it as “to negate contact” (16).

<sup>43</sup> “What to make of the fate of those who returned to Africa . . . but *who are no longer African?*” (17) – italics in the original.

<sup>44</sup> Langston Hughes, in *The Big Sea*, recalls his travel to Africa and relates his disappointment when native Africans identify him as a white man and reject his claim to blackness (101-105). For a detailed interpretation of this passage, see Warren, 400-402.

representations of Africa.<sup>45</sup> These attempts to reconnect with a place of origin, to recapture a forgotten culture, and to assert an identity inscribed in a continuous historicity are occurrences of the urge to return to a previous state of unity.

Glissant explains that this aspiration declines with the passing of time as the displaced population adapts to its new environment. However, the adjustment can sometimes be hindered or precluded by external factors, inherent to the place of relocation. This impediment usually generates a mimetic impulse: “Là où cette prise en compte sera non pas seulement difficile mais obscurcie . . . apparaîtra l’obsession de l’imitation” (47).<sup>46</sup> The urge to imitate leads to the illusive belief that, in the end, the transplanted population will become similar to the inhabitants of the new land to such an extent that it will necessarily be assimilated. This thought forms the premise on which arguments in favor of assimilation would be formulated by white and black people alike. During the interwar period, in the United States, in the Francophone Caribbean, and, to some extent, in France, the racist attitude of the dominant class prevented people of African descent from interacting with their social surroundings. Many black intellectuals advocated imitation as a way to demonstrate black people’s abilities and, consequently, gain acceptance in white society. However, Glissant mentions “l’insidieuse promesse de se constituer en l’Autre, l’illusion d’une mimésis réussie” (41) as one of the many difficulties against which the displaced populations have to struggle.<sup>47</sup> Writers such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas, rebelled against the assimilative propositions of their contemporaries.

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<sup>45</sup> See, Maryse Condé, “Négritude Césairienne, Négritude Senghorienne” (1974), 414-16; Lilyan Kesteloot, *Césaire et Senghor: un pont sur l’Atlantique* (2006), 13-15; Shireen K. Lewis, *Race, Culture, and Identity* (2006), 36; Najib Redouane, “Léopold Senghor et Aimé Césaire” (2009), 23-24.

<sup>46</sup> “Where that coming to terms is not only difficult but made *inconceivable* . . . the obsession with imitation will appear” (18) – Italics in the original.

<sup>47</sup> “The insidious promise of being remade in the Other’s image, the illusion of successful mimesis” (15) – The French text implies a profound change in the self, which becomes the other, and not only an image of the other. Frantz Fanon dealt with the mimetic impulse and neurotic assimilation in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1965).

The desire to return to an idealized place of origin and the temptation of servile imitation can be rejected thanks to a practice of detour which Glissant, borrowing Herbert Marcuse's terminology, defines as "une 'attitude d'échappement' . . . collectivisée" (48).<sup>48</sup> The idea is to circumvent the issues encountered in the new land by adopting, for example, a specific linguistic idiom such as Creole or African American dialects (48-51) or by developing religious syncretism (51-52).<sup>49</sup> Both those examples can be seen as a form of subversion of cultural objects imposed by the dominant group which helps the transplanted population to come to terms with the situation into which they have been thrust. Diversion draws the dominant class' attention away from the attempts of the lower group to appropriate and, consequently, transform the prevailing culture.<sup>50</sup> This allows individuals to familiarize themselves with the forms of the culture in which they have been displaced and to create their own path by fusing them with her own background, thus producing unprecedented means of representation.<sup>51</sup>

Glissant mainly envisions the detour as a metaphoric journey constructed around spatial notions of mobility, travel, and border-crossing trajectories. Its geography spreads out between a people's immediate environment, where it has to face an insurmountable problem, and another location from which a critical attitude could emerge. This aspect of the detour is formulated when Glissant mentions "cette nécessité du Détour pour *aller quelque part*, c'est-à-dire lier en la circonstance la solution possible de l'insoluble à des résolutions pratiquées

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<sup>48</sup> "An 'attitude of collective release'" (20) – see, Herbert Marcuse, *L'Homme unidimensionnel* (1964), 266-67.

<sup>49</sup> The comprehension of the 'detour' as a linguistic strategy is the most frequent interpretation of Glissant's concept presented in scholarly works – see, Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory*, chap. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Dash's use of the English word 'diversion' to translate Glissant's 'détour' is more appropriate in this specific context. He also uses the expression 'trickster strategy' to underline this aspect of Glissant's concept (23).

<sup>51</sup> In the preface to *Dialect of Modernism* (1994), Michael North draws attention to the linguistic resistance of African American authors: "the real struggle of writers like McKay, Toomer, and Hurston was often not to preach or inform but rather to free a language from domination" (8). The statement could obviously be extended to all the intellectuals presented in this thesis. The detour, seen as a strategy of language, could help black American authors to appropriate and subvert the language of the dominant class. A parallel can be drawn with the process that Baker describes in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* as 'the mastery of form' (22) and 'the deformation of mastery' (56).

par d'autres peuples" (53).<sup>52</sup> This strategy implies the existence of another location which is transformed into an intermediary space between the individual and the localized problem he encounters. It creates a space of reflection where the imposed—and often problematic—culture of the new milieu can be transformed and adapted according to the need of the displaced population. The mediatory location usually serves as a point of comparison which brings an original perspective on the inextricable situation from which the individual has fled. It also allows for a better self-understanding and an increase in self-confidence and self-respect. At the outset of *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987), Melvin Dixon emphasizes the necessity for black authors in the United States to invent spaces where they could develop their own artistic idiom: "Afro-American writers, often considered homeless, alienated from mainstream culture, and segregated in negative environments, have used language to create alternative landscapes where black culture and identity can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed 'place'" (2). The alternative spaces of the detour do not necessarily have to be imaginary. In France as well as in the United States, black intellectuals needed to escape predetermined social positioning and to found spaces of self-expression in order to be able to create their own artistic representations. They could attempt to find a solution by going—or simply looking—abroad. Concepts and ideas discovered in other locations would often help in the construction of these vital enclaves of expressive freedom in the midst of a hostile society.

However, Glissant is aware that individuals may not always find the solution they seek in the place of relocation. He makes clear that "le Détour *ne mène nulle part*, quand sa ruse originelle ne rencontre pas les conditions concrètes d'un dépassement" (53).<sup>53</sup> In order to be profitable, the detour has to provide the opportunity to transcend the problem it is meant to

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<sup>52</sup> "This need for a trickster strategy *to find another place*: that is, in these circumstances, to link a possible solution of the insoluble to the resolution other peoples have achieved" (23) – italics in the original.

<sup>53</sup> "Diversion *leads nowhere* when the original trickster strategy does not encounter any real potential for development" (23) – italics in the original.

solve. Talking about the Antillean Négritude, Glissant notes that, although it starts from a Caribbean predicament, it goes beyond the local situation and embraces “l’assomption universelle de la souffrance nègre” (53-54).<sup>54</sup> The trajectory of Du Bois is a good example of this widening of interest from the local to the transnational. In the introduction to the Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois series, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains that “the hallmark of Du Bois’s literary career is that he coined the metaphors of double-consciousness and the veil . . . to define the place of the African American within modernity.” He immediately adds that “the paradox of his career, however, is that the older Du Bois became, the more deeply he immersed himself in the struggle for Pan-Africanism and decolonization against the European colonial powers” (xv). This journey corresponds to the evolution of many black thinkers, American and French, during the interwar period. Starting from local preoccupations delineated by a certain provincialism, they progressively developed a transnational outlook on the questions of race and racism.

It would be reductive, however, to define the detour as a broadening of consciousness enabling individuals to escape an impasse located in a definite place. Detour is certainly a transnational endeavor: emerging from a problematic situation encountered inside a domestic space, it seeks a resolution in another locale. Although it induces travel, symbolic or real, outside the confines of the national, although it inaugurates movement across territorialized boundaries, it nevertheless remains centered on local geographies. To complete a detour necessarily implies a circular trajectory which comes back to the point of departure: “Le Détour n’est ruse profitable que si le Retour le féconde: non pas retour au rêve d’origine, à l’Un immobile de l’Etre, mais retour au point d’intrication, dont on s’était détourné par force

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<sup>54</sup> “The universal identification with black suffering” (24).

(56-57).<sup>55</sup> Although it takes shape in transnational circuits, the purpose of the detour is to attend to a local situation; it remains inevitably connected to the national. Without a coming back to the point of entanglement, the detour partly loses its significance and its efficiency. For Glissant, although an aborted attempt still forms a practice of the detour, it is essential to return to the location from which the individual departed.

The national territory then constitutes the conclusive stage of the detour, seen as a unique and isolated endeavor. However, although cases of detour can be studied singlehandedly—this is, for example, what Glissant does in *Le Discours antillais* when he talks about Fanon, and what we will do in each chapter of the thesis, the strategy should rather be seen as a recurrence which gains its significance from incessant reiterations. Black internationalism, as Nadi Edwards notes in his review of *The Practice of Diaspora*, forms “a constellation of detours” (125). It has to be understood as a constant ‘weaving back and forth’ between local and extra-local planes. It incessantly shifts between national and transnational perspectives without being fixed in an abiding position. This interpretation of the detour as multiple circular trajectories throws a new light on the transnational aspect of the relations which linked and shaped black communities across the Atlantic during the interwar period.<sup>56</sup> It is precisely because it accounts for the inextricably intertwined nature of national and international circuits that the notion of detour can help us understand the intricacies of transnational connections.

The idea to apply some of Glissant’s insights to the present study comes from Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora*. Although the concept of ‘mimetic impulse’ does not

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<sup>55</sup> “Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away” (26).

<sup>56</sup> Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic could also be useful to frame the contacts which linked black communities in the United States and in France. The thought of Glissant and the work of Gilroy display close affinities – see Kathleen Gyssels, “The ‘barque ouverte’ (Glissant) or *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy): Erasure and Errantry” (2012).

appear in the work, both the notions of ‘return’ and ‘detour’ are explored in the “Variations on a Preface” (22-25). The chapter only mentions the idea of ‘return’ as a preamble to a consequent reflection on the concept of ‘detour.’ Although Edwards underlines the indirectness of the process—his use of the term ‘indirection’ can also hint at a certain aimlessness—and stresses its importance for a nascent black internationalist discourse, he finally seems to discard the notion because of its reliance on a nationally defined frame of reference.<sup>57</sup> He indeed remarks that “unfortunately, Glissant’s discussion of detour in *Le Discours antillais* tends to fall back on the nation-state and the national community as the final points of entanglement, the end of the road” (23). Stemming from a localized situation, the detour necessarily returns to its point of emergence. However, it is not, as we have said earlier, limited to the national territory, but rather a ‘weaving back and forth’ between two planes. Edwards gives the concept a dialogic dimension which transforms the ‘elsewhere’ into an abstract common ground where people of African descent can meet and converse. Although mediated through imaginary and idealized representations, or real-life experience, the detour is always rooted in a geographically determined place. The journey it articulates—symbolical or actual—can help us understand the processes of identification which take place in the transnational networks developed between the American and French black communities at the time.

The choice of Glissant also stems from a desire to introduce his work further into Anglo-Saxon scholarship and, more specifically, into the field of transnational American studies, to which this thesis belongs. The chasm between Anglophone and Francophone scholarship, about which Celia M. Britton complains in her introduction to *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory* (1999), has been to a great extent overcome (4-5). However,

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<sup>57</sup> The concept almost never appears in the rest of the book.

although Glissant is not an unknown figure anymore, his concepts seldom appear outside the fields of postcolonial, diaspora, and Caribbean studies. To extend its usage to the field of American literary studies—conceived as transnational or not—is one of the purposes of the thesis. The concepts that Glissant develops in his work can help clarify the transformative processes which occur when people of different socio-cultural background meet and confront their points of view. It can also, as we will see, provide insights about networks of literary influence and intertextual connections. The model of ‘detour’ and ‘return,’ in particular, accounts for the fluidity and versatility of ideas as they travel across cultural, political, and territorial borders.

### **Overview of the Chapters**

This thesis focuses on five moments when the practice of detour shaped the contours of black internationalism during the interwar years. The first chapter will explore René Maran’s publication of *Batouala* (1921) and its reception among African American intellectuals. The novel invited its black readers to a double detour. On the one hand, it hinted at the possibility for people of African descent to actively resist racism and react against injustices and inequalities. The attribution of the Goncourt Prize to a novel written by a black author raised the hopes of black Americans and confirmed the idea of a color-blind France. On the other hand, and more problematically, it activated images of Africa incompatible with what the black intelligentsia advocated concerning artistic representations of blackness. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Jessie Fauset reacted to the publication of the novel and celebrated Maran’s achievement. The representation of Africa in the novel nonetheless aroused a feeling of unease among them. The translation of the novel into English, as we will see in the first chapter, would relieve them of the ambiguous feelings which prevented them from praising Maran’s work wholeheartedly.

The second chapter will show how Locke's edition of *The New Negro* (1925) aimed at delineating a living place for the black American community at the heart of American society. It achieved this objective thanks to a detour through Africa which underlined and circumvented the ambivalence towards the ancestral continent. This feeling of unease had become notably tangible with the debates around the publication of *Batouala*. In the anthology, the South, considered as the birth place of black American culture, is seen as a pivotal site both for the location of the black community within the United States and for a connection to its transatlantic origins. Africa is paradoxically approached from two apparently contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, Locke grants ample space to the Negro vogue and its primitivist discourse. Poems and articles celebrating the innate qualities of the black race can indeed be found throughout the work. On the other hand, the ancestral continent is presented from an ethnographic perspective. Africa could provide black people with the necessary cultural background to contribute to American culture and thus become participants in the development of the country.

These detours—in *Batouala* and in *The New Negro*—formed the background of the black renaissance in the United States. In addition, the first two chapters show that, until the mid-1920s, black intellectuals in France and in the United States seemed to be primarily concerned with national issues. Maran wrote his novel in order to bring about a discussion on colonial practices in France. Similarly, Locke conceived his anthology with an American perspective in mind. These single detours did not result in the transcendence that Glissant describes in *Le Discours antillais*: they constitute self-enclosed processes which emphatically begin and end in the national space. They can nevertheless be considered as the first instances of the multiple circuitous trajectories which would become an essential element in the development of black internationalism.

The third chapter, which explores black Parisian newspapers from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, emphasizes the crucial transition which took place during the following decade. In the course of a few years, from *Les Continents* to *La Revue du monde noir*, French black intellectuals redrew the frontiers of the black race and brought the Franco-American connection to the forefront. Transnational frames of reference took precedence over points of view limited to national territories. The locations that these journals proposed as detours bear witness to a growing interest among the Parisian black circles in the achievements of African Americans. Locke's *The New Negro*—along with other black American texts—progressively formed an essential subtext for the ideas developed by people of African descent in France.

Claude McKay's second novel, *Banjo*, on which we will concentrate in the fourth chapter, illustrates this important change of paradigm. Set in the city of Marseilles, it depicts a group of black drifters living in the port amid the international population which crowds the docks. The diasporic diversity of the characters illustrates the transnational perspective which begins to prevail at the time. It marks a departure from the colonial vision of *Batouala* and the nationally-inflected politics of the New Negro movement. The novel even goes beyond the idea of black internationalism conceived as a relation between black communities defined through national allegiances. It proposes a sort of vagabond cosmopolitanism as a solution to the problem encountered by people of African descent in the western world. The conclusions of the novel put into practice the 'complete break,' that Glissant mentions in *Le Discours antillais*. In spite of its numerous reflections on the relations of black individuals to the 'white world,' the main characters ultimately attempt to escape the confining walls of western civilization, thus avoiding a return to the point of entanglement. The detour, in McKay's *Banjo*, does not come to completion.

It however initiates another detour which would constitute the foundation of the idea of Négritude. The final chapter explores the emergence of the Francophone movement before

World War II. Principally focusing on the theoretical and poetical texts of Césaire, Senghor and Damas, it emphasizes the African American detours which informed the nascent movement. *Légitime Défense*, a single-issue periodical published in June 1932, forms the preface to the developmental stage of a concept that Césaire, Senghor, and Damas would then expand in their respective works. From the first apparition of the term in the pages of *L'Étudiant noir* to Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, French intellectuals found in their American predecessors a source of inspiration which would allow them to escape the overbearing influence of French culture. Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Sterling A. Brown had a particularly remarkable impact on the evolution of the Négritude founders. Their works formed multiple detours through black America which led to the invention of innovative poetical idioms in French and the production of an original understanding of the black race.

These five moments are crucial in the relationships between the French and American black communities. Many accounts of black internationalism present them as unavoidable milestones in the development of racial solidarity between the two linguistic groups.<sup>58</sup> They bring into play transnational connections and constitute practices of detour which reveal the fluidity and polyvalence of Glissant's concept. The notion of race is at the center of these reflections. Black intellectuals of the interwar period constantly redefined its meaning and reshaped its contours. National and international spaces played an important role in the negotiation of its significance. The transnational conversation under scrutiny in this thesis bears witness to a transition from national to transnational frames of reference, from perspectives where unbounded imaginations superseded territorialized lines of thought. However, domestic preoccupations remained present at all time in the reflections of the black

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<sup>58</sup> See, among others, Edward Oben Ako, "The Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude Movement" (1982), chap. 3; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*; Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*; Ikonné, *Links and Bridges*; Kesteloot, *Les Écrivains noirs de langue française* (1963); Miller, *Nationalists and Nomads* (1998), chap. 1.

writers which found inspiration through detours across territorial boundaries. This thesis intends to revisit a narrative of transnational collaborations by reasserting the importance of national spaces in the formation of international networks, and to propose a new model through the framing of ‘black internationalism’ as a practice of Glissant’s detour. During the interwar period, African American literature was developed through ‘a weaving back and forth’ across the Atlantic, between the protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance and French black intellectuals in Paris.<sup>59</sup> René Maran’s *Batouala* constituted the first major point of contact between the American and French black communities.

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<sup>59</sup> The importance of Paris as a site of encounters and transnational networks had often been underlined – see, for example, Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir* (1996); Patrice L. R. Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World* (2002); Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis* (2010); Michael Gooble, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis* (2015).

## CHAPTER 1

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### **The African American Reception of René Maran's *Batouala***

In October 1922, a full-page advertisement for René Maran's *Batouala*, entitled "The Whole World is Reading It," appeared in the *Crisis*. Claiming that the novel is "the *Iliad* of the African Negro" (277) and attesting to its world-wide success, it quotes several newspapers which praised the book, including the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Evening Sun* and the *London Daily News*. A portrait of the author appears in the top left corner of the page. On the table that forms the backdrop of this representation lie a few books, some writing material, and, more significantly, a statue of Atlas holding the earth. The choice of this figure, which inevitably establishes a link between the sculpted artefact and the man sitting in front of it, is not without significance. In Greek mythology, Atlas stands as the commander of the Titans during the war against the Olympian gods. To infer that the magazine wanted to present the author of the prize-winning novel as a leader in the fight against white dominance may constitute a daring interpretation. Together with the textual reference to Homer's *Iliad*, the sculpture nonetheless situates Maran in a mythological paradigm. Although the advertisement magnifies the impact of the novel for obvious marketing reasons, it also reveals an important aspect of the reception of *Batouala* among African Americans. One year after its original publication, the novel is officially considered an unavoidable part of the black literary canon. Lydie Moudileno, commenting on the francophone novel in sub-Saharan Africa, remarks: "if most novels of the early decades [of the twentieth century] were largely ignored upon release and have remained secondary since, there is perhaps one notable exception: René Maran's 1921 novel *Batouala*" (127). The prestigious aura surrounding the Goncourt prize had a decisive impact on the novel's national and international success. The size of the lettering in the *Crisis* advertisement constitutes a graphic illustration of the importance of its official

recognition. Except for Maran's name, the bigger font is used to clarify that the novel was awarded the famous literary prize. The organization of the information into a visible hierarchy underlines the significance of the event, at least in the United States. Without the celebrated award, the book may have gone unnoticed in spite of its literary qualities.

The plot of *Batouala* revolves around three main characters. Batouala is a tribal chief from Ubangi-Shari. Bissibingui, a young man from the village, has become his friend. Prompted by the passions of youth, he has already seduced eight of Batouala's nine wives and now lusts after Yassiguindja, the chief's favorite. The woman is not indifferent to the young man's advances and she patiently awaits the opportunity to satisfy his stirring desires. Their relation is not necessarily based on love: it is mainly motivated by sexual impulse. During the Ga'nza, a ceremony of circumcision and excision which constitutes a central scene of the novel, Batouala discovers the passion which draws Bissibingui and his wife together. Determined to seek revenge, he decides to defer it until he finds an appropriate moment. Understanding the peril that looms above their heads, Yassiguindja plans to flee with her lover. However, Bissibingui makes clear that he prefers to stay until the end of the hunting season: he secretly intends to kill Batouala during the next fire hunt. He does not have time to go through with his plan. The tribal chief is fatally wounded by a panther while attempting to murder his young rival. He dies several days later, killed by the effort he made to prevent the lovers from having sexual intercourse in his own hut.

This storyline allows Maran to describe the customs of the Bandas that he has observed during his multiple stays in Africa as a colonial administrative officer. Through the description of everyday actions, *Batouala* conveys the traditional way of living of the natives of Ubangi-Shari. In symbiosis with their environment, they have developed a philosophy of

life based on a resigned acceptance of natural laws and external forces.<sup>60</sup> The observation of nature dictates personal and social behaviors. For example, scratching oneself when waking up is almost part of Batouala's daily routine since "tous les êtres animés se grattent, au sortir du sommeil" (29).<sup>61</sup> The jealousy of Batouala notwithstanding, adultery is also generally tolerated since individuals should follow their instincts: "Une femme ne doit jamais se refuser au désir d'un homme. La réciproque est vraie. La seule loi est d'instinct" (46).<sup>62</sup> Sexuality, which forms one of the central themes of the novel, is presented as natural. Unhindered by social or moral conventions, it pervades the culture of Batouala's tribe. Maran attempts to convey this ambience throughout the novel. He thus describes the ritual of the Ga'nza, the dance of love which follows the ceremony, and the orgy in which the whole village eventually participates. With the publication of *Batouala*, Maran attempts a kind of 'literary ethnography.'<sup>63</sup> Although the events that punctuate the story occur against a backdrop of colonialism, the evils of the colonial system, virulently condemned in the preface, do not have a direct impact on the narrative. The characters occasionally object to white dominance, but the story nevertheless unfolds independently of the presence of the colonists, focusing mainly on African customs and daily life.

In the preface, Maran insists that the novel is simply an objective record of facts. A form of cultural relativism pushes him to present African and European societies as different, but equally valuable, civilizations. *Batouala* is an attempt to present a realistic description of a

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<sup>60</sup> The tribe's reaction to the presence of white people on their land is fatalistic. In the fourth chapter, Batouala recalls how they ran away from the first settlers. They began a frantic exodus, fighting the tribes which owned the land they invaded. On the brink of obliteration, they finally decided to remain in Grimari and reluctantly accepted the domination of the white colonizers (72-73).

<sup>61</sup> "All animate creatures scratch themselves when they awake" (7). Versions of *Batouala*—available in English—are of unequal value. In the footnotes, unless otherwise indicated, I will use the 1932 translation by Alvah C. Bessie.

<sup>62</sup> "A woman should never refuse to yield herself to a man's desire. The reciprocal is also true. Instinct is the only law" (17).

<sup>63</sup> The idea of 'literary ethnography' is borrowed from Mangeon (98) – see also Pierre Philippe Fraiture, "Batouala, véritable roman d'un faux ethnographe?" (2005).

non-western way of life. The colonial abuses depicted in the preface offer an illustration of the savagery of European civilization and prevent the readers from judging African customs as barbarity. Juxtaposing two different worlds and presenting the flaws and positive qualities of both, Maran invites his readers to question the concepts of culture and civilization. In the preface, he emphasizes his role of meticulous observer: “J’ai mis six ans à y traduire ce que j’avais, là-bas, entendu, à y décrire ce que j’avais vu” (9).<sup>64</sup> The word “là-bas,” trapped between two commas, emphasizes the distance which separates the readers from the setting where the events they are about to witness take place. Maran is the dedicated translator who allows them to travel to these remote regions. His familiarity with the sites where the action unfolds undeniably confers an authentic quality upon the events related in the novel.

This air of authenticity was most likely one of the reasons why the members of the Goncourt Academy voted for *Batouala* in December 1921. The storm of thrilled and disparaging comments occasioned by their decision and, simultaneously, by the book to which it referred, was unprecedented. In France, in spite of some enthusiastic reviews, the novel aroused suspicion and was severely criticized.<sup>65</sup> Maran’s diatribe against the colonial system, which mainly appears in the preface, became the epicenter of virulent debates. In his dispatch of March 25, 1922, for the *Toronto Star Weekly*, Ernest Hemingway summarized the discussion which surrounded the novel in the French capital:

Maran . . . was bitterly attacked in the Chamber of Deputies the other day as a defamer of France, and biter of the hand that fed him. He has been much censured by certain Frenchmen for his indictment of French imperialism in its effects on the natives of the French colonies. Others have rallied to him and asked the politicians to take the novel as a work of art, except for the preface, which is the only bit of propaganda in the book (112).

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<sup>64</sup> “I have taken six years to translate what I had heard, there, and to describe what I had seen” (translation by Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora*, 85).

<sup>65</sup> See Egonu, “Le prix Goncourt de 1921 et la ‘querelle de Batouala’” (1980); Porra, *L’Afrique dans les relations franco-allemandes entre les deux guerres* (1994), 73-91; Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire* (2002), 86-106; Rubiales, “Notes sur la réception du Goncourt 1921 en France” (2005).

On the one hand, some people appreciated the aesthetic dimension of *Batouala* and considered the novel from a literary perspective only. On the other hand, polemical reactions focused on the preface while Maran's critique of colonialism—principally limited to this introductory part—was expanded to the whole novel.<sup>66</sup> French political circles considered that the book posed a serious threat to the maintenance of law and order in the colonies: the book was therefore banned in the African and Caribbean French territories.<sup>67</sup> The government increasingly put pressure on Maran, who resigned from his post in the colonial administration in August 1924.<sup>68</sup>

In spite of, or perhaps due to, the agitation which surrounded its publication, *Batouala* proved to be a considerable success both on the national and international scene. In his biography of Maran, Keith Cameron describes the swift dissemination of the novel and states that, in 1922, although it had been published only a few months earlier in France, *Batouala* had already been translated into English, German, Spanish, and Russian (39). In the United States, the news of its success appeared in newspapers during the days immediately following the official announcement of the award. On December 15, 1921, a *New York Times* reviewer wrote in an article entitled “French Negro's Novel Wins Prix Goncourt” that, in spite of its scandalous depiction of immoral behaviors, the book was “both unusual and written in a very attractive and pointed style” (4). The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of the same day announced “A

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<sup>66</sup> For example, René Trautmann, in the introduction to *Au Pays de 'Batouala'* (1922), does not make any distinction between the preface and the novel. He criticizes the two texts as if they constitute a homogenous argument – see Elsa Geneste, “Autour de *Batouala* de René Maran” (2010).

<sup>67</sup> In *Banjo*, Claude McKay mentions this fact at the beginning of the sixteenth chapter, when Ray encounters a student from Martinique: “Ray asked him if he had ever heard René Maran's *Batouala*. He replied that the sale of *Batouala* had been banned in the colony and sniggered approvingly. Ray wondered about the truth of that; he had never heard any mention of it. ‘It was a naughty book, very strong, very strong,’ said the student, defending the act” (199). The fact that the young Antillan defends this decision shows that even among black francophone people the novel was not unanimously accepted. Both Jack and Berliner date the interdiction to 1928 (Jack, 28, and Berliner, 86).

<sup>68</sup> For a detailed account of the measures taken against Maran after the publication of *Batouala* in the colonies, see Charles Onana, chap. 4-6.

Negro's Literary Triumph" and congratulated the French jury for its impartiality.<sup>69</sup> On December 18, the *Washington Post* dispassionately relayed the news remarking nonetheless that the Goncourt Prize constituted "one of the most cherished literary awards in France" (3).<sup>70</sup> The reviews listed in the *Crisis* advertisement also show the wide range of newspapers which related the event. On January 29, 1922, the *New York Times* came back to the subject and published an extended article under the title "Negro Winner of the Prix Goncourt" in which the neutrality of the members of the Goncourt Academy was once again underlined. It stressed the fact that the political implications of the novel did not play a role in the attribution of the prestigious prize: "they did not allow anything that M. Maran said to the detriment of France's administration of her African colonies . . . to influence them in the award of the Prix Goncourt. They confined themselves strictly to judging its literary merits" (43). This statement echoed the disposition expressed in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and it is worth noticing that, in general, the choice of *Batouala* as the winner of the competition reinforced the image of France as a prejudice-free country in both black and white America.

For African Americans, the novel assumed even greater significance. In his article on the reception of the novel in France, Egonu explained that "pour les Noirs parisiens la décision des Dix en faveur du 'roman nègre' dépasse le cadre strictement littéraire; c'est plutôt et avant tout le triomphe de la race noire" (529).<sup>71</sup> The same would extend to the black American intelligentsia. On March 24, 1922, Charles W. Chesnutt wrote to Benjamin Brawley and expressed his satisfaction after reading the novel and his admiration for Maran. Carried along by his own enthusiasm, he exclaimed: "while he is not a United States Negro, I

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<sup>69</sup> In "Rene Maran, the New Negro and Negritude," Fabre explains that the *Brooklyn Eagle* journalist "was happy to note that the fairness of the Latin mentality enabled the French to reward the excellence of a black man, thereby setting 'a good example for the United States'" (341).

<sup>70</sup> See "Negro Wins Literary Prize."

<sup>71</sup> "For the black people from Paris the decision of the Ten in favour of the 'Negro novel' exceeds the strictly literary framework; it is rather and first of all the triumph of the black race."

think his triumph is one of which all those who share the blood of his race . . . may well be proud.”<sup>72</sup> To have a black novel crowned by a white institution was perceived by many black intellectuals in the United States as a confirmation of the opportunities that the post-war years seemed to offer. Maran became an embodiment of success and his example was to encourage the young generation of artists that emerged at the time. African American leading figures such as Charles S. Johnson, Du Bois and Locke praised the novel and presented its author as the epitome of the cultivated black man. In the *Crisis*, the book was reviewed twice, in February and March 1922.<sup>73</sup> In May of the same year, a portrait of René Maran drawn by Albert Smith appeared on the front cover. A short notice inside the magazine, under the section titled “The Looking Glass,” mentioned the virulence of French criticism against *Batouala* (34).<sup>74</sup> The advertisement, which appeared in October 1922, promoted the newly-translated publication that Jessie Fauset had reviewed in the September issue (218-19).

However, the *Crisis* was not the only black journal interested in René Maran. In the second chapter of *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards notes that “what is remarkable about the black U.S. reception of *Batouala* is that it received rave reviews from all quarters of the ‘New Negro’ movement . . . Robert Machray, William H. Ferris, J. A. Rogers, and Hubert Harrison lauded *Batouala* in Marcus Garvey’s newspaper, the *Negro World*” (69).<sup>75</sup> In “‘Batouala’ Is New Paris Sensation,” the *Chicago Defender* proudly claimed that “the book . . . is of high literary merit and has been called one of the most noteworthy achievements of the century” (A1).<sup>76</sup> In July 1922, the *Journal of Negro History* asserted that “the public must feel

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted by Michel Fabre in “Rene Maran, the New Negro and Negritude,” 341.

<sup>73</sup> See, Madeline G. Allison, “The Horizon,” 175, and Jessie Fauset, “No End of Books,” 208-209.

<sup>74</sup> The covers of the *Crisis* are analyzed in Rhonda L. Reymond’s article entitled “Looking in: Albert A. Smith’s Use of Repoussoir in Cover Illustrations for the Crisis and Opportunity” (2010). The May 1922 portrait of René Maran is briefly discussed together with the other covers which present portraits of famous black men (233-37).

<sup>75</sup> About the reviews in *The Negro World*, see also Martin, *Literary Garveyism* (1983), 94-99.

<sup>76</sup> Between December 1921 and June 1922, the journal featured six articles about Maran’s novel – see “‘Batouala’ Wins Prize de Goncourt” (24 Dec. 1922); “Winner of French Prize” (14 Jan. 1922); “‘Batouala’ Is New Paris Sensation” (25 Feb. 1922); Alvan F. Sanborn, “Maran, French Novelist” (11 Mar. 1922); A. L. Jackson, “The Bookshelf” (27 May 1922); “‘Batouala’ in English” (3 June 1922) – In “The Bookshelf,” Jackson

indebted to René Maran” (345). In January 1923, in the very first issue of *Opportunity*, edited by Charles S. Johnson, a laudatory review praised “the stark genius of *Batouala*” (31).<sup>77</sup> In November of the same year, Locke devoted the main part of his article on French colonial literature to the prize-winning novel. The September 1924 issue of the journal presented his famous exchange of open letters with Maran which was the starting point of a lasting friendship.<sup>78</sup> The periodical also opened its pages to the francophone writer, who wrote articles on Anatole France in December 1924, on Gandhi in January 1925, and on Lucie Cousturier in August 1925.<sup>79</sup>

With the publication of *Batouala*, Maran acquired a solid reputation in the United States and found among African Americans an interested audience. His attainment allowed him to be considered by African American intellectuals as a member of the black elite that Du Bois had defined in 1903 in an essay entitled “The Talented Tenth.”<sup>80</sup> Published in *The Negro Problem* alongside contributions by Booker T. Washington, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, among others, this text defined a strategy of uplift and emancipation through the education of the best elements of the race. The conclusion affirmed, without ambivalence, the need for such an intellectual aristocracy at the same time as it defined the role it had to play among black people: “The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people . . . The Negro race, like all

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publishes a letter from E. A. Carter, in which the sender claims to have translated Maran’s novel. He (or she) explains that “the translation of ‘Batouala’ is not an easy task, because of the rather stilted constructions which Maran uses, doubtless being the very correct French of the university.” The announcement of an imminent publication of an English version in June 1922 in the pages of the *Chicago Defender* does not therefore necessarily refer to the Seltzer publication. It seems however that Carter’s translation has been lost.

<sup>77</sup> See “More about René Maran,” *Opportunity* 1.1 – In April of the same year a poem by Cullen entitled “The Dance of Love. After Reading Rene Maran’s *Batouala*” also appeared in the magazine. It would be published again in Cullen’s first book of poetry, *Color* (1925). The poet also made an implicit allusion to Maran’s novel in his famous poem, “Heritage.” I analyze the poem as it was published in *The New Negro* in 1925 in the second chapter of the thesis, 87-88.

<sup>78</sup> For more details about this exchange and about the friendship between Alain Locke and René Maran, see Chidi Ikonné’s *Links and Bridges*, chap. 2 and Michel Fabre’s *From Harlem to Paris*, chap. 5. – see also Ikonné, “René Maran and the New Negro,” and Fabre, “Rene Maran, The New Negro and Negritude.”

<sup>79</sup> The article on Lucie Cousturier is titled “The Harriet Beecher Stowe of France.”

<sup>80</sup> The essay has been published recently in Chandler, *The Problem of the Color-Line*, 209-42.

other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men” (75).<sup>81</sup> In the context of the early twenties, Maran could obviously serve as an example of success. *Batouala* was indeed the first novel written by a black author to receive that kind of official recognition. Propelled into the spotlight, its author demonstrated the ability of the black race to produce praiseworthy literature. However, at a time when the definition of a black artistic production constituted the main concern of the American black intelligentsia, *Batouala*, seen as a literary work, and not as a world phenomenon, did not necessarily correspond to what African American intellectuals advocated.<sup>82</sup>

This chapter aims at reassessing both the publication of Maran’s novel and its reception by black elites in the United States. Fabre, Edwards and Ikonné have studied the connection between Maran and Harlem Renaissance intellectuals.<sup>83</sup> Whereas Fabre and Ikonné present *Batouala* as an influential novel during the emergence of the New Negro movement, Edwards proposes a more nuanced analysis and underlines the “ambiguities and contradictions” that punctuate its reception among African Americans (110). He also points out the importance of the domestic spheres—French and American—in the contacts that the publication of the novel triggered. Focusing successively on the preface, the novel, and the 1922 translation by Thomas Seltzer, this chapter demonstrates that national paradigms defined

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<sup>81</sup> Du Bois uses the last sentence, which forms the concluding statement of the essay, as the opening declaration of his plea. It is important to bear in mind that his text is addressed to white Americans. In the third paragraph, Du Bois reproaches them for their ignorance about the black race: “You misjudge us because you do not know us” (34). It is the role of the ‘Talented Tenth’ to draw the white public’s attention to the problems of their black fellows. With *Batouala*—especially in the preface, Maran raised people’s awareness of the injustices perpetrated in the colonies.

<sup>82</sup> Between February and November 1926, the *Crisis* offered a symposium, entitled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed” (reproduced in Gates and Jarret, 109-204). Personalities such as Carl Van Vechten, H. L. Mencken, DuBose Heyward, Mary White Ovington—among many others—were asked to reply to a questionnaire on the representation of black people in art. These numerous comments illustrate the different opinions discussed during the period. Du Bois’s essay, “Criteria of Negro Art,” which I briefly discuss in the first part of the chapter, was proposed, as part of this symposium, in October 1926 (reproduced separately in Gates and Jarrett, 257-60).

<sup>83</sup> The relationship between Maran and Locke is at the forefront of these interchanges – see Fabre, “Rene Maran, The New Negro and Negritude”; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, chap. 2; Ikonné, *Links and Bridges*, chap. 2-3.

the creation and dissemination of the work.<sup>84</sup> On the one hand, Maran writes *Batouala* from within what Gary Wilder has called, in his work on Négritude and colonial humanism between the two world wars, the “imperial nation-state” where “colonies were reconceptualized as integral, if legally ambiguous, parts of the French nation” (4). On the other hand, African American intellectuals such as Du Bois, Locke and Jessie Fauset read it from an American vantage point. Rather than Edwards’s idea of ‘reciprocity,’ which emphasizes the international dimension of the contacts under scrutiny and implies a form of mutual understanding, this chapter contends that, with regard to *Batouala*’s interpretation, the protagonists of this transatlantic discussion failed to understand each other. The interpretations of Maran’s novel in the United States distorted, through translation, its original meaning in ways that brought the text into agreement with the agenda of the black American elite. It initiated a dialogue between two communities centered on local preoccupations without really allowing an explicit debate about the transnational dimension of racial struggle.

### **The Preface of *Batouala*: the Indignation of a Black Frenchman**

*Batouala* is principally famous for its polemical preface in which René Maran vehemently attacked the colonial system. Early in 1921, in a letter to his friend Manoël Gahisto, to whom the novel is dedicated, Maran acknowledged his awareness of the controversial aspect of his text: “La préface elle-même me plaît. En supprimant quelques mots par-ci par-là, je lui ai donné une allure encore plus hostile. Les coloniaux me voueront aux gémonies. Peu importe. Ce n’est pas pour des idiots que j’écris.”<sup>85</sup> Reworking the preface in order to increase its antagonistic style, Maran self-consciously prepared his condemnation of

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<sup>84</sup> Another English translation was published in 1922 by Jonathan Cape’s newly founded publishing firm in London.

<sup>85</sup> “I like the preface. Deleting a word here and there, I gave it a more hostile appearance. The colonists will expose me to public contempt. It doesn’t really matter to me. I don’t write for idiots.”

the colonial system. He did not care about the potential critiques of the colonists because he knew that, in France, he had a readership. The question of colonial policies could—and should—be discussed.<sup>86</sup> In the preface of *Batouala*, he sketches out the context which surrounds the publication of his book and finally claims that the time is ripe for a debate on the questions the book poses: “Il vient, par hasard, à son heure. La question nègre est ‘actuelle’” (12).<sup>87</sup> Conscious of bringing his own original and distinctive voice to an on-going conversation, he self-consciously denounces the abuses that he has witnessed during his stay in Ubangi-Shari.

One of the aspects of Maran’s critique which eluded the majority of his detractors at the time is its patriotism. It is precisely because of his love for France that he wants to correct the wrongdoings of its representatives in the colonies. In *Ambivalent Desire* (2002), Brett A. Berliner remarks that, far from being in favor of any form of colonial independence, Maran advocated a reform of the policies practiced in the colonies and considered the promotion of republican principles as a moral duty: “His *cri de coeur* was neither for African liberation, much to later critics’ dismay, nor for abandonment of the colonial project. Maran simply demanded that France live up to its universal ideals” (85).<sup>88</sup> At the end of the preface’s first part, he summons his fellow French writers and enjoins them to take action in order to correct the faults that were bringing disgrace on their nation (13-15). Pierre Philippe Fraiture rightly stresses that the use of a formulation borrowed from the Christian tradition—“la France le veult” (15)—triggers a ‘process of sacralization’ which transforms Maran’s plea into a call to

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<sup>86</sup> In his survey of French colonial literature, published in November 1923, Alain Locke notes that the publication of *Batouala* took place at the right moment: “without a creation of a new taste in the reading public, it could never have come to public expression” (38). Maran seemed to be aware of this change and seized the opportunity to address this new audience.

<sup>87</sup> “By chance, it has come at the right time. The negro question is ‘of the moment’” (x).

<sup>88</sup> In *Les Continents*, as we will see in chap. 3, Maran would put forward the same arguments.

crusade against the enemies of the French nation (85). It initiates a battle against injustice and opens the way to the reformation of the colonial system.

Maran carefully structures his discourse in spite of his apparent outrage: four steps, divided into four paragraphs, lead to his climactic castigation of civilization. First, he apostrophizes Georges Bruel about the demographic statistics of Ubangi-Shari that appeared in his colossal work entitled *L'Afrique Equatoriale Française* (1918).<sup>89</sup> Claiming that the information that is available in France does not necessarily reflect the colonial reality, Maran affirms that an honest study of demographic statistics would confirm the veracity of the abuses he denounces and, thus, justify his indignation. Realizing that mere statistical evidence could not be sufficient to move his readers, he then tries to appeal to their emotions by relating the dramatic anecdote of starving natives searching for food amidst animal excrement: “dix, vingt ou même cent indigènes [ont] cherché . . . parmi le crottin des chevaux appartenant aux rapaces qui se prétendent leurs bienfaiteurs, les grains de maïs ou de mil non digérés dont ils devaient faire leur nourriture” (10).<sup>90</sup> Comparing colonial officials to birds of prey, Maran casts light on the hypocrisy of white people who pretend to be in Africa for the good of the natives when their only interest is in fact profit.<sup>91</sup>

This striking scene is followed in the next two paragraphs by an ironic justification of the lack of empathy displayed by the French population. Maran inserts a statement borrowed from Montesquieu, who, in 1748, in the fifteenth book of *L'Esprit des Lois*, approached the

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<sup>89</sup> An extended version of the book appeared in 1935. Interestingly, the title was modified to become *La France Equatoriale Africaine*.

<sup>90</sup> “Ten, twenty, or even a hundred natives went to the dung of the horses, owned by the vultures who dub themselves their benefactors, and hunted for undigested grains of maize or millet to feed upon” (1922 Seltzer translation, 9).

<sup>91</sup> Du Bois's contribution to *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke in 1925, echoes this idea when it describes the situation in Senegal: “There was no one in the colony except the unrisen and undeveloped blacks who thought of the colony as developing and being developed for its own sake and for the sake of the mass of people there. Everyone of intelligence thought that Senegal was being developed for the sake of France and inevitably they tended to measure its development by the amount of profit” (396). In Maran's description, the ‘unrisen and undeveloped blacks’ are reduced to wallow in horse manure because of the cupidity of their alleged benefactors.

question of slavery, a practice he considered evil by nature. The fifth chapter, from which the quotation is taken, ironically stages the author as a defender of such practices and enumerates the reasons that Europeans could have to enslave the African peoples (68-70). By including this quotation, Maran frames his discourse in a historical perspective. Setting colonization against slavery, he implies that the arguments in favor of colonial rule do not essentially differ from the statements which justified the slave trade. The next paragraph, which constitutes the last phase of the argumentation, interprets the innumerable deaths that occur in the colonies as an inevitable counterpart of progress: “Après tout, s’ils crèvent de faim, par milliers, comme des mouches, c’est que l’on met en valeur leur pays. Ne disparaissent que ceux qui ne s’adaptent pas à la civilisation” (11).<sup>92</sup> Reminiscent of Social Darwinism, this line of thought posits the necessity of a selection process in the acquisition of civilized values. It also ironically suggests the superiority of Western civilization over African cultures.

The existence of this kind of reasoning among French colonials prompts the violent rhetorical outburst which probably constitutes the most famous passage of *Batouala*'s preface. Decrying its innumerable murders and blaming its insidious lies, Maran describes civilization as a destructive force that annihilates everything it approaches:

Civilisation, civilisation, orgueil des Européens, et leur charnier d’innocents, Rabindranath Tagore, le poète hindou, un jour, à Tokio, a dit ce que tu étais! Tu bâtis ton royaume sur des cadavres. Quoi que tu veuilles, quoi que tu fasses, tu te meus dans le mensonge. A ta vue les larmes de sourdre, et la douleur de crier. Tu es la force qui prime le droit. Tu n’es pas un flambeau, mais un incendie. Tout ce à quoi tu touches, tu le consumes (11).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> “After all, if they break down from hunger by thousands, like flies, it is because their country is being ‘developed.’ Only those who don’t adapt to civilization disappear” (1972 translation by Barbara Beck and Alexandre Mboukou 8).

<sup>93</sup> “Civilization, civilization, pride of the Europeans, and their burying-ground for innocents; Rabindranath Tagore, the Hindu poet, one day in Tokyo, said what you were. You build your kingdom on corpses. Whatever you may want, whatever you may do, you act with deceit. At your sight, gushing tears and screaming pain. You are the might which exceeds right. You aren’t a torch, but an inferno. Everything you touch, you consume” (Beck and Mboukou 8-9).

The reference to Rabindranath Tagore situates Maran among the intellectuals who denounced white supremacy in the aftermath of the First World War. In his article about the Afro-Asian thinkers who opposed European cultural hegemony, Michael Adas underlines the fact that “Maran’s skillful exposé of the empty promises of civilizing colonizers added an influential African voice to the chorus of dissent that began to drown out Europeans’ trumpeting of the global mission in the post-war years” (57). This inclusion of an African element in the already well-established debate on the value of European civilization is probably what Du Bois saw in *Batouala*. In his contribution to the New Negro anthology, he makes clear that “Maran’s attack on France . . . marks an era.” He immediately adds that “never before have Negroes criticized the work of the French in Africa” (392). In his opinion, France represents the land of hope and *Batouala* gives voice to the plight of black French Africa.

The preface is in agreement with what Du Bois would advocate in “Criteria of Negro Art,” published in the *Crisis* in October 1926.<sup>94</sup> In this article, which is undeniably a milestone in the definition of black aesthetics, Du Bois formulates the essential principles which should inform black art. The text is especially famous for the propagandist assertion which punctuates the end of the essay: “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (328).<sup>95</sup> In Du Bois’s opinion, the purpose of artistic production is to liberate black people from the chains of inequality and ignorance; propaganda enables black artists to reach this goal. With his denunciation of the injustice perpetrated in the French colonies, Maran could be presented to the African American community as an example of the committed writer who does not hesitate to get involved in controversy when he has to defend the rights of fellow black people. The novel could henceforth be considered an encouraging

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<sup>94</sup> This text should be considered Du Bois’s personal contribution to the symposium on the representation of black people in art initiated by the *Crisis* magazine in February 1926 and should be read in relation to the other opinions expressed in this series of articles.

<sup>95</sup> The page number refers to Sundquist’s *Reader*.

international precedent and deserved some publicity in the United States. This is precisely what Du Bois offered to *Batouala* in the pages of the *Crisis*.

The support that the magazine gave to the novel tacitly illustrates his endorsement of the book. However, Du Bois did not react personally to its publication. He only alluded to the importance of its preface in 1925 in his contribution to *The New Negro*. To infer that he did not like the sexually explicit content of the novel constitutes a hypothetical, but plausible, interpretation of this silence. His abhorrence of what he considered an obscene subject is well-known and it would not be too far-fetched to imagine that he did not share the same aesthetic sensibility as Maran.<sup>96</sup> The *Crisis* would officially promote the novel because of the positive implications of its success for the whole race. However, Du Bois did not feel he had to comment personally on the stylistic characteristics of the novel. His interest in *Batouala* seems to be limited to its preface, which could be interpreted as a piece of propaganda against white dominance.

### ***Batouala* as a ‘Novel of Impersonal Observation’**

Throughout the preface of *Batouala*, Maran insists on the fact that his novel is based on what he has witnessed in Africa. In the first two pages, he asserts the “documentary status” of his work.<sup>97</sup> The novel thus purports to be an objective record of actual situations. In the preface, two main arguments support his claim. First, Maran acknowledges the substantial length of time he needed to bring his novel to maturity: “J’ai mis six ans à le parfaire” (9).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Du Bois’s review of McKay’s *Home to Harlem* in the *Crisis* is maybe the best example of his virulent reaction against topics that he considers immoral – see chap. 4, 131.

<sup>97</sup> I have borrowed the idea of “the documentary status of black art” from an article written by Henry Louis Gates and entitled “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext” (1979). It refers to the fact that texts that claims to give a truthful image of a real situation can come “under a scrutiny not primarily literary” (44). This is exactly what happened in France when *Batouala* was first published. In *Negritude and Literary Criticism* (1996), Jack also underlines the factual dimension of colonial literature (20). As we will see later in this chapter, *Batouala*’s realism situates the novel in this colonial tradition.

<sup>98</sup> “I have devoted six years to perfecting it” (ix).

Secondly, he affirms that he did not indulge in the presentation of his own opinion: “pas un moment, je n’ai cédé à la tentation de dire mon mot” (9).<sup>99</sup> Although the first statement can be easily verified, the second rests entirely upon the ethos of the speaker carefully constructed in the first few lines of the preface. Addressing Henri de Régnier and Jacques Boulenger in the opening words, Maran begins his text as he would a letter. The epistolary dimension of the rhetoric brings his readers into confidence. The atmosphere of intimacy that pervades the initial paragraphs efficiently persuades them to trust Maran who even comments ironically on the supposed lack of intelligence of African people: “Dépourvus d’esprit critique, il n’ont jamais eu et n’auront jamais aucune espèce d’intelligence. Du moins on le prétend. A tort, sans doute. Car, si l’inintelligence caractérisait le nègre, il n’y aurait que fort peu d’Européens” (9-10).<sup>100</sup> Maran demonstrates in these few sentences his critical abilities. He shows his capacity to disprove prejudices and to present an objective portrayal of the situation.

Moreover, this statement situates the authorial voice that forms the background of the book. In spite of the light-hearted, but nevertheless cutting, remark about European people, the ironic assumption about the lack of acumen of the natives puts a distance between the speaker and African natives. By showing his awareness of colonial stereotypes, Maran reminds his readers of his involvement in the colonies. He further emphasizes it by presenting an image in which he clearly distinguishes himself from the indigenous population. Evoking the diffuse light of the moon, he depicts himself resting on a deck-chair and listening to the talk of some Africans: “Par les soirs de lune, allongé en ma chaise-longue, de ma veranda,

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<sup>99</sup> “Not for one moment in the course of these six years have I given in to the temptation to speak my piece” (Beck and Mboukou 7).

<sup>100</sup> “Deprived of inquiring minds, they have never had and will never have any kind of intelligence. At least, that is what is claimed. Wrongly, no doubt. For if a lack of intelligence characterized the Negro, there would be but few Europeans” (Beck and Mboukou, 7) – I deliberately cut the end of the translated sentence (“in Africa”) because this detail does not appear in Maran’s original text.

j'écoutais les conversations de ces pauvres gens" (10).<sup>101</sup> The adjective 'pauvres' shows that Maran displays a compassionate attitude toward the natives. However, his comfortable position above them reminds the readers of his official role in Africa. Maran should be trusted because he does not belong to the colonized peoples. He works for the French government and, therefore, does not share the sufferings of the African people. In spite of his empathy for the natives, the emphasis on his participation in the colonial enterprise widens the gap between him and the African natives he depicts.

The distinction is further reinforced by the subtitle of the novel: *Batouala: véritable roman nègre*.<sup>102</sup> Franz Fanon explains, in "Antillais et Africains" (1955), the nuances that the terms 'noir' and 'nègre' conveyed before World War II: "chez tout Antillais, avant la guerre de 1939, il n'y avait pas seulement la certitude d'une supériorité sur l'Africain, mais celle d'une différence fondamentale. L'Africain était un nègre et l'Antillais un Européen" (263).<sup>103</sup> Maran's choice to qualify his novel as 'nègre' while he presents himself as a black Frenchman in the preface seems to separate him from the indigenous people he depicts in his book. In "Autour de *Batouala*" (2010), Elsa Geneste remarks that, during the genesis of the novel, Maran uses the term 'nègre' in his correspondence with Charles Barailley as an anthropological term designating the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa (41).<sup>104</sup> Without being contemptuous, as Fanon's remark suggests, the distinction implied by the novel's subtitle only

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<sup>101</sup> "On moonlit evenings on my porch, stretched out in my chaise lounge, I listened to the conversations of those poor people" (Beck and Mboukou 8).

<sup>102</sup> *Batouala: a True Black Novel* (Beck and Mboukou).

<sup>103</sup> "For any Antillean, before the 1939 war, there was not only the certainty of a superiority over the African, but the assurance of a fundamental difference. The African was a nigger and the Antillean a European" – the choice of the word *nigger* here stems from the need to convey the insulting connotation that the French word 'nègre' implies in this sentence.

<sup>104</sup> Since this article only appears online and is not paginated, I am referring here to the paragraph number. Geneste divides Maran's use of the word 'nègre' into three phases: 1/ from 1912 to 1920, it designates, as we have said, inhabitants from sub-Saharan Africa; 2/ from 1920 to about 1940, it is used to speak about victims of colonial racism; 3/ in 1947, with the publication of *Un Homme pareil aux autres*, it encompasses all the people suffering from racial exclusion (45). By 1924, as we will see in chapter 3, he uses the term to speak about all the members of the French black community – see chapter 3, footnote, 30; see also Elsa Geneste and Silvina Testa, "Nominations et dénominations des Noirs" (2010), 4.

aims at reinforcing Maran's legitimacy to speak on the matter. As a colonial administrative officer and as a French citizen, he denounces the abuses which take place in the colonies.

However, it would be erroneous to believe that Maran wanted to hide his racial background. Although *Batouala*'s subtitle signals his desire to be considered a Frenchman and to put his African ancestry at a distance, he never openly repudiated his racial background. The controversy resulting from the publication of his novel made him acutely aware of his connection to the black populations of Africa. He participated in the French colonial system and, simultaneously, had to claim an African origin. Far from decreasing his credibility, this duality, which recalls Du Bois's double-consciousness, reinforced his authoritative voice. His intermediary location—between the readers and the people he depicts—granted him the neutrality which underpins his claim to authenticity. His insistence on his role of translator is revealing. In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards underlines the importance of this strategy:

When one speaks of 'translating' a culture, one rhetorically posits it both to be discrete and to be inaccessible without mediation—and so the work of translating is the work of carrying it across that linguistic border, bringing it closer to a home audience. This of course privileges the translator as an agent of cultural commerce with absolute authority (85-86).

Maran is conscious of the power bestowed on the translator. Indeed, when Yassiguindja suggests that Bissibingui join the colonial militia, she remarks: "Ce n'est pas pour rien, vois-tu, que les commandants ne comprennent que ce que leurs miliciens veulent qu'ils comprennent" (123).<sup>105</sup> This statement could simply refer to the fact that the militiamen are liars. However, in *Djouma, chien de brousse*, a sequel to the adventures of the tribal chief written by Maran in 1927, an episode develops the idea that their authority principally stems from their role of translator. When the natives have to pay the tax, the black interpreter

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<sup>105</sup> "You see, there's a good reason for the Commandants to understand only what their militiamen want them to" (71).

purposely delivers an erroneous version of Batouala's words, a translation which prompts the white administrator to send the helpless tribal chief to jail (186). Aware of the importance of translation, Maran self-consciously embraces his role of mediator. White by his education and black by his origins, he introduces himself as an objective intermediary and, therefore, the ideal narrator.

The space in which he deliberately places himself allows him to portray native Africans in the book without indulgence. Without relying on the romanticized idea of the noble savage, he claims to portray black people as he has seen them. Consequently, he does not hide Batouala's jealousy and even suggests that it precipitates his death. When, in the final scene, the main character forces the lovers apart, the narrator reproaches him this last act of violence: "voilà ton oeuvre! Tu es heureux, n'est-ce pas? . . . Achevé par l'effort que tu viens de faire, tué par toi-même, d'une seule pièce, tu as chu sur le sol comme un grand arbre tombe" (189).<sup>106</sup> In the same vein, he presents Bissibingui as a young man stirred by sexual impulses: "Il était dans sa seizième saison des pluies. C'est à ce moment-là que les mâles vraiment dignes d'être des mâles, du matin au soir courent après les femmes comme la panthère après une antilope" (47).<sup>107</sup> He also depicts the natives as fond of alcohol and insinuates that Batouala's father died of his own excesses (98). The characters of the novel are ordinary men and Maran calls attention to their human imperfections. By the end of the novel, when Batouala is slowly dying, the narrator follows the tribal chief's thoughts. He asserts that "il n'y avait ni bandas ni mandjas, ni blancs ni nègres. Il n'y avait que des hommes" (186).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> "Behold your work! Aren't you happy? . . . Overcome by the effort you've just made, killed by yourself, you have fallen solidly to earth, like a great tree" (118).

<sup>107</sup> "He was in his sixteenth rainy season, the time when males are really worthy of the name, and chase after the women from morning to night, like a panther after an antelope" (17).

<sup>108</sup> "There were neither Bandas nor Mandjias, neither whites nor blacks . . . there were only men" (Beck and Mboukou 147-148).

This statement summarizes what Maran intends to show in his novel: like the European colonists, native Africans are men with all the flaws of human nature.<sup>109</sup>

In a similar vein, Maran represents Batouala's tribe as a social construct with its customs and its rules, however imperfect. The sixth chapter of the novel opens with the burial of Batouala's father who died during the Ga'nza ceremony. It allows Maran to present a detailed description of the Bandas' funeral rite. The tribal chief, seated next to Bissibingui, thinks about his people's customs and realizes that the intrusion of the white colonizers has disrupted the continuous transmission of age-old traditions: "la coutume! On n'en faisait guère cas, aujourd'hui. Les jeunes et, en général, tous ceux qui servaient chez les blancs, la tournaient en dérision" (101).<sup>110</sup> While Maran was probably aware that European readers of *Batouala* would find this civilization exotic and even barbarous, he attempts to portray it in an objective way. The Ga'nza ceremony, the funeral of Batouala's father, the mythological stories that the characters exchange, all these elements form a culture which deserves to be known. Maran does not want to idealize or vilify it; he simply wants to write "un roman d'observation impersonnelle" (18).<sup>111</sup> Recalling the time before white people's intrusion in Africa, Batouala gives an astonishing picture of the life they had: "Jadis, avant la venue des blancs, on vivait heureux. Travailler peu, et pour soi, boire et dormir, de loin en loin avoir des palabres sanglantes où l'on arrachait le foie des morts pour manger leur courage, et se l'incorporer, – tels étaient les jours heureux que l'on vivait, jadis, avant la venue des blancs"

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<sup>109</sup> The same argument reappears in *Journal sans date* (1927), republished in 1947 as *Un Homme pareil aux autres*. The main character, Jean Veneuse, desperately attempts to be accepted as a man without being constantly assessed according to his racial background. Fanon analyzes the novel in the third chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1965).

<sup>110</sup> "Custom! Nowadays very little heed was paid to custom. The young people and all, generally speaking, who served with the whites turned away from custom in ridicule" (Seltzer 114-115).

<sup>111</sup> A "novel of impersonal observation" (19).

(77-78).<sup>112</sup> In order to avoid presenting a romanticized vision of Africa, Maran blends a depiction of a peaceful philosophy of life with images of barbarous customs.

Without plainly indulging in what Sieglinde Lemke calls ‘cultural primitivism,’ he confronts African culture with the Western model of civilization.<sup>113</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Batouala ponders on the notion of ‘work’ and underlines the difference of conceptions between black and white people (21). Throughout the novel, he reflects on the encounter of these dissimilar cultures: he admires the technology of the Europeans (38-39), mentions their cruelty when they abandon the children they have with black women (78), complains about their inability to understand his people’s customs (102), and compares the merits of the white doctors to the black sorcerers (183). He does not limit his critique to their behavior in Africa: he also alludes to the brutality of their civilization outside the confines of the continent. At the end of the novel, he evokes the barbarity of the First World War: “Guerre et sauvagerie était tout un. Et ne voilà-t-il pas que l’on forçait les nègres à participer à la sauvagerie des blancs, à aller se faire tuer pour eux, en des palabres lointaines” (187).<sup>114</sup> If Maran does not attempt to demonstrate that the way of life of African people is better than European civilization, he at least makes it clear that it is not worse.

This cultural relativism reflects the development of the field of anthropology during the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, as Fraiture notes in his article on Maran,

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<sup>112</sup> “In the old days, before the coming of the whites, people were happy. *To work a little, and for oneself, to drink and sleep*, and from time to time, bloody palavers when they ripped out the livers of the dead to eat them and absorb their courage—such were the happy days in which they used to live, before the coming of the whites” (41) – I have slightly modified the translation in order to be closer to what Maran expresses. The words in italics are my translation.

<sup>113</sup> Quoting Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas’s seminal work, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), Lemke explains that “‘cultural primitivism’ . . . is based on the belief that ‘existing primitives, or so-called ‘savage’ peoples’ live a better life’” (26). This concept accounts for the idealization of primitive cultures. In *Batouala*, Maran avoids this pitfall by showing the flaws of the African civilization about which he writes.

<sup>114</sup> “War and savagery were the same thing. And here they were forcing the negroes to participate in the white man’s savagery, making them go and get killed in some far-away palaver” (116).

<sup>115</sup> In the United States, Franz Boas played a prominent role in the development of the field – see Eriksen and Nielsen 49-50.

at the time, two main conceptions defined a domain which was in the process of becoming an institutionalized discipline. On the one hand, physical anthropology consecrated a raciological approach based on the measurement and comparison of physical patterns. On the other hand, cultural anthropology argued that each civilization had its own intrinsic value (27-28).<sup>116</sup> The society described in *Batouala* stands in its own right and Maran implicitly claims that it should not be judged according to European standards. In order to counter the widespread idea that African people are uncivilized, he deliberately endows his characters with notable eloquence and undeniable rhetorical skills. At the end of the Ga'nza ceremony, the readers witness the only instance of 'petit-nègre' present in the novel: a black soldier talking to his white commandant expresses himself in pidgin French (95-97). Berliner insists that, at the time, the deformed version of French language presented in popular culture reinforced the belief in "the indigène's subordinate linguistic and therefore intellectual status" (77).<sup>117</sup> In contradistinction to stereotyped representations, the Banda people depicted in *Batouala* are cultured and articulate. Their sophisticated language intimates the existence of a culture and civilization which deserves to be studied as such. Through linguistic volubility and ethnographic accuracy, Maran attempts to propose a different literary approach to a subject too often fraught with exoticism.

In his article on the colonial literature of France, which appeared successively in November 1923 in *Opportunity* and a month later in *The Negro World*, Locke describes *Batouala* as a ground-breaking novel. Disregarding the political dimension of the book, he argues in favour of the novel's "bold realism" (38).<sup>118</sup> This focus on the literary achievement

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<sup>116</sup> See also, Thomas H. Eriksen and Finn S. Nielsen, *A History of Anthropology* (2013), chap. 3-4; Sibeud, *Une Science impériale pour l'Afrique*, chap. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Berliner rightly suggests that the dialogue between the black soldier and the commandant exemplifies Maran's idea that "petit-nègre was the result of colonization and the French government's civilizing mission" (77).

<sup>118</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Locke's essays will be quoted from Molesworth's *The Works of Alain Locke* (2012). On the publication of Locke's "The Colonial Literature of France," see Edwards, 103, and Martin, 95-96.

of the francophone writer constitutes the core of his laudatory comments. While he is aware of the tensions between the natives and the colonists which form the background of the story, he nevertheless maintains that the success of the book results principally from its realistic approach to the topic: “with cruel realism and cutting irony [Maran] has sought to drive the lie and hypocrisy out of its traditional point of view” (41). Breaking with the condescending tone of colonial literature and the demeaning representations of the Africans which characterized it, Maran opens the way to a more genuine depiction of African life and customs. Thus, more than the subject in itself, it is the aesthetic choice to depict a vivid image of reality rather than a romanticized fantasy that makes the novel a groundbreaking piece of literature. Locke affirms that *Batouala* and the other novels he analyzes in his article could be seen as “a revolutionary change” which brings colonial literature to a turning point (38).<sup>119</sup>

Locke argues that Maran’s book signals a development away from a colonial literary tradition marred with paternalism and sentimentalism through its profound modification of the treatment of African life as an artistic subject. In the first chapter of *Negritude and Literary Criticism* (1996), Belinda E. Jack elaborates on two discrete tendencies in the literary depictions of distant cultures: “the author of the colonial text [is] working very much from within—and indeed for—the system and from a position of a certain degree of familiarity with it, whereas the author of the ‘négrophile’ text, on the other hand, like the author of other exotic texts, often [has] little or no first-hand experience of the place with which his narrative [is] concerned” (17). The expertise of colonial authors allows them to present a faithful representation of the places and peoples they paint. Exotic texts, on the contrary, would rely on widely accepted stereotypes, without confronting them with the lived reality of actual situations. Locke locates the distinction between these currents within a temporal framework.

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<sup>119</sup> He also included two novels published in 1922: Gaston Joseph’s *Koffi*, written in reaction to *Batouala*, and Jean and Jérôme Tharaud’s *La Randonnée de Samba Diouf*.

According to him, *Batouala* forms a transitional moment in the colonial literature of France precisely because it has encouraged “a strong interest in the human portraiture of native life in and for itself” (38).<sup>120</sup> Crucial to the development of a genre that was still awaiting definition, it affirms the intrinsic value of a culture which differs in obvious ways from western normative conceptions of civilization.<sup>121</sup> *Batouala* makes the case for a deferential literary treatment of African native life.

Turning to the American scene, in *The New Negro*, Locke remarks that this type of approach seems to correspond to a recent literary orientation in the United States as well. In “Negro Youth Speaks,” when he describes the qualities of the burgeoning generation of African American artists, he states that “[they] have declared for a lusty vigorous realism; the same that is molding contemporary American letters” (50).<sup>122</sup> He goes so far as to hold *Batouala* accountable for the development of this need for lifelike verisimilitude among the young black writers of the time:

Fortunately just at the time the younger generation was precipitating out, *Batouala* came to attention through the award of the Prix Goncourt to René Maran, its author, in 1923 [sic]. Though *Batouala* is not of the American Negro either in substance or authorship, the influence of its daring realism and Latin frankness was educative and emancipating (50-51).

In *Links and Bridges*, Chidi Ikonné dedicates the third chapter to explore “the recurrent projection of *Batouala* as a forerunner of the Harlem Renaissance” (65). Although he misinterprets the novel in some respects, his conclusion adequately summarizes the influence that the book had on the emergent generation of African American writers: “René Maran became famous by writing about a black chief and his community. The lesson was clear to the

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<sup>120</sup> *Batouala* was not included in the contemporary canon of colonial literature for obvious political reasons. Locke’s interpretation of the novel as part of this literary tradition is somewhat unique.

<sup>121</sup> For a contemporary attempt to define colonial literature, see Roland Lebel, *Etudes de littérature coloniale* (1928) and *Etude de la littérature coloniale en France* (1931) – see also Jack, chap. 1.

<sup>122</sup> In *Terrible Honesty*, Ann Douglas confirms Locke’s statement on contemporary American literature when she argues that modern white writers of the period were obsessed with truth and wanted to produce a literature which would reflect the reality of the modern world (31-40).

young writers of the black movements. They could equally become famous by writing about blacks: themselves” (65).<sup>123</sup> Locke’s interpretation of the novel stresses the fact that it has become possible to write about black experience without indulging in condescension and sentimentality. Moreover, an unashamed pursuit of authenticity seems to correspond to the expectations of the American public. *Batouala*’s stylistic aspect, Locke claims, should therefore be emulated in order to depict a reality which differed totally from the world Maran portrayed in his prize-winning book, namely the life of the black American community.

### ***Batouala* in America: a Distorted African Detour**

Although Locke partially credits Maran for partaking in the formation of the New Negro authors, he clearly defines *Batouala* as belonging to a tradition which is not directly related to what African American writers are trying to achieve. In fact, in his article on French colonial literature, he already analyzes it as a non-American literary work. Occasionally locating it within African culture (43), Locke’s essay notably describes the novel as belonging to the French literary tradition: “with the stylistic capacities of a Flaubert or a de Maupassant, Maran seems almost to have chosen to be the Zola of colonial literature” (38).<sup>124</sup> Although Locke admires the artistic qualities and agrees with the aesthetic choices of *Batouala*, he clearly distinguishes it from African American artistic production. The fact that he does not even attempt to place it in a broad category such as black literature or black art casts a light on his nationally-focused preoccupations. The novel only remains, in spite of all its qualities, on

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<sup>123</sup> Ikonné argues that the novel ultimately condemns the African way of life that Maran wants to present. Instead of trying to see *Batouala* as a juxtaposition of two cultures which, although different, do not constitute ideals of civilization, he sees it as a justification of colonialism: “far from being the victims of the condition described in the preface, *Batouala* and his people, as currently presented, suffer, and die of those things which the white man is alleged to be against. Therefore, their suffering and death justify the alleged white man’s suppression of native customs and traditions, an action which *Batouala* himself supports, at least unconsciously” (63).

<sup>124</sup> The article entitled “Negro Winner of the Prix Goncourt,” which was published in the *New York Times* on 29 January 1922, already compared Maran to Emile Zola. The author of *Batouala* was indeed described as “a writer with a Zolaesque capacity for parading details of filth and degradation and brutality” (9).

the margin of the black American horizon. It is as if Locke could not repress an impression of estrangement which compels him to categorize Maran's publication as removed from his cultural sphere.

Similarly, Jessie Fauset expresses her discomfort regarding the novel. Her review published in the *Crisis* in March 1922 illustrates her mixed sentiments. The opening sentence immediately locates Maran's book outside African American culture: "'Batouala' is really what its sub-title indicates, a story of actual Negro life (*véritable roman nègre*) and because it is it differs absolutely from any concept which we in this Western World have of life" (208). She situates herself and the readership of the *Crisis* in the 'Western World' and emphasizes the distinction between the African American community and the natives described in the book. Locke had cautiously excluded the novel from the American cultural sphere, linking it to another literary current by acknowledging its connection with the French tradition. Fauset, however, goes even further, emphasizing its status as an African cultural product. She argues that Maran's portrayal of the natives is probably limited to "the people of the equatorial regions whose customs differ from those of the people of the coast towns" (208). By locating the story in a precise territory, she distances herself—and all black Americans—from Batouala's world and implicitly affirms the existence of an insurmountable gap between modern society and the primitive community depicted in the novel. After this initial defining assessment, she concedes her admiration for *Batouala's* "almost cinema-like sharpness of picturisation" (208). She nonetheless repudiates the detailed depiction of the Ga'nza as "too raw, too unvarnished." She adds, as if to reassure her black readership, that "Maran is never offensive, never suggestive" (208). Oscillating between admiration and rejection, she praises the novel without conviction and, at the same time, seems hesitant to criticize it too openly.

In an article that appears in the *World Tomorrow* of the same month, she makes a statement which clarifies her uneasiness: "'Batouala' is a marvellous piece of artistry, but we

are half glad it is written in French so that the average white American won't insist that here is the true African prototype" (77). Although she admires Maran's literary achievement, she cannot accept his portrayal of the African natives. In the *Crisis* review, she had insisted that the novel was not representative of all the African peoples. Descriptions of the ancestral continent, she claims, should not be limited to the idea that "native Africans are 'savages'." She suggests through a rhetorical question that the history of Africa could reveal the richness of black people's past: "how much do we learn of indigenous African art, culture, morals?" (77). Maran's novel does not present a flattering image of the African natives and, in her opinion, *Batouala* could only accentuate a stereotyped vision of black people in the United States. Her contradictory comments point to the dilemma that she faces. On the one hand, she wants to insist that Maran has, with justification, been awarded one of the most important literary prizes in France. She would like to praise his book and claim that black people are able to make valuable contributions to literature. On the other hand, she seems to fear that the type of characters presented in the novel would reinforce the white American population's prejudices against people of African descent. Her statement in the *World Tomorrow* emphasizes her feeling of relief at the thought that the barrier of language prevents the widespread dissemination of the work in the United States. *Batouala* would not, however, stay untranslated for long.

In 1922, the novel was translated into English and published by Thomas Seltzer in New York. The man who would become famous for his publication of D. H. Lawrence in the United States was at the time struggling with censorship. In July 1922, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice prosecuted him. Three books published by the end of 1921 were incriminated: D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, Arthur Schnitzler's *Casanova's*

*Homecoming* and an anonymous work entitled *A Young Girl's Diary*.<sup>125</sup> Although the case was finally dismissed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, Seltzer knew that he had to be careful if he wanted to avoid another trial. In this context, the translated version of *Batouala*, which was scheduled to appear in the fall, had to be expurgated. Consequently, the English text, prepared by Adele Szold-Seltzer, was cleared of all the sexual allusions that appeared in the French text.<sup>126</sup> As a result, the translated novel, printed in the United States in August 1922, presented but a paled version of the culture Maran intended to portray.

Adele Szold-Seltzer carefully deleted the slightest allusion to details that could be considered disturbing. For example, at the end of the first chapter, Batouala has his daily sexual encounter with his wife without even waking her: “De même que tous les autres matins en se levant, il voulut remplir ses fonctions de mâle. Comme elle était habituée à leur accomplissement quotidien, bien qu’elle dormît encore, il n’était pas nécessaire qu’il la réveille” (31).<sup>127</sup> The English version simply states that the tribal chief “went to her as he did every morning” (36). The translated text does not mention the fact that Yassiguindja is still asleep, which implies a marital rape for an American or European readership.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, when Yassiguindja suggests that Bissibingui flee with her, she concludes that “vivre, c’est *coucher avec l’homme que l’on désire*” (120).<sup>129</sup> The euphemism underlines a sexualized vision of life which grants a central role to impulses in the relations between men and women. The translated version simply notes that “to live is *to be* with the man one wants” (138).<sup>130</sup> This modification transforms a sensual conception of life into a romanticized image of

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<sup>125</sup> For a detailed account of those facts, see G. Thomas Tanselle, “The Thomas Seltzer Imprint” (1964).

<sup>126</sup> Tanselle nevertheless remarks that the Watch and Ward Society considered preventing the publication of *Batouala* in the United States (398).

<sup>127</sup> “Just as every morning when he rose, he felt the need to fulfil his masculine function. As she was used to its daily performance, even though she were still asleep, he did not have to wake her up” (8).

<sup>128</sup> The idea of marital rape does not appear in the text itself. Batouala’s behavior does not seem to be unusual in the context of the African culture described in the novel. The French text even suggests that Yassiguindja has become accustomed to this kind of treatment and that she does not mind her husband’s attitude.

<sup>129</sup> “To live means *to sleep with* the man you desire” (71) – my italics.

<sup>130</sup> My italics.

platonic love. The translation shifts the African-ness of the original text into a desexualized version compatible with western—or, in this case, American—norms.<sup>131</sup> In the last pages of the French version, when the lovers finally indulge in their passion, the narrator gives a graphic description of penetration: “Bissibingui s’approcha de Yassiguindja, l’embrassa et, la ployant consentante sous l’êtreinte de son désir, prit possession de sa chair profonde” (188).<sup>132</sup> Although the narrator specifies that Batouala’s wife tacitly gives her consent to the young man, the text stresses the physical dimension of the scene and describes the sexual relation as an act of possession. The English version respects the content of the scene without mentioning any physical detail: “Bissibingui went to Yassiguindja and drew her into his arms. She yielded to his desire” (205). The physicality of the description disappears and the explicit depiction of an on-going act of sexual intercourse becomes a vague evocation of a woman giving in to a man’s desire. Although these alterations do not prevent the readers from understanding the plot, they remove from the text the richness of detail which formed the backdrop of the culture portrayed in the novel.

Through the process of expurgation, nudity and overt sexuality are veiled. Consequently, African culture, which is expressed through the physical presence of the body, is concealed in vague assertions as soon as it presents sexual undertones. The fifth chapter, which describes the Ga’nza, is certainly the most altered passage of the book. During the ceremony, the excision of the young women, which is depicted in much detail in Maran’s text (89-90), is summarized in one short sentence: “The old woman came up and attended to the girls” (103). The ensuing dance of love, which forms an allegory of sexual desire, becomes a representation of “the girl resisting, the man, symbolized in Yassiguindja, trying to win her love, and finally succeeding” (105). Besides, the original version presents Batouala’s wife,

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<sup>131</sup> The Cape version, published in the United Kingdom in 1922, also displays similar traces of censorship.

<sup>132</sup> “Bissibingui approached Yassiguindja, clasped her and, enfolding her consenting body in his amorous embrace, took possession of her flesh” (117).

according to her choreographic character, as ‘the male.’ It describes the dance without taking distance from the story it tells, whereas the translated text keeps reminding the readers that they are witnessing a symbolic dance and that Yassigundja is only playing a role. For example, when the French narrator explains that “*déçu, le mâle revint sur ses pas*” (92), the English translation states that “*Yassiguindja, feigning disappointment, stepped backward*” (105).<sup>133</sup> The Seltzer version focuses on the performative aspect of the dance without acknowledging its immediate impact. In the French version, the spectators, oblivious of the theatrical nature of the choreography, embrace its narrative thread and witness, without any analytical mediation, the drama of seduction which unfolds before their eyes. The symbolic dimension of the representation does not need to be deciphered. The homoerotic aspect of the dance does not obscure its meaning. Yassiguindja becomes ‘the male’ and expresses, through her movements, the intensity of sexual desire. The whole performance is part of a philosophy of life based on the acceptance of natural urges.

The world of Batouala revolves around the idea of yielding to the forces of nature. To alter the directness of the sexual allusions which punctuate the text profoundly modifies the meaning of the novel. In the second chapter, the narrator clarifies the African people’s relation to nakedness and sexuality: “*L’homme et la femme sont faits l’un pour l’autre. Puisqu’ils ne peuvent ignorer ce en quoi ils diffèrent, pourquoi se gêner ? La honte du corps est vaine. La pudeur n’est qu’une de ces hypocrisies exportées par les blancs*” (35).<sup>134</sup> Conventions concerned with proper clothing are seen as mere affectation that simply belong to another culture and consequently cannot be understood by black natives. Accepting the presence of the body is part of a way of life which differs considerably from the customs and

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<sup>133</sup> “*Cheated, the male retraced his step*” (50).

<sup>134</sup> “*Man and woman are made for each other, and since they cannot possibly be ignorant of how they differ, why bother about it? Bodily shame is foolish, and bashfulness is only one of those hypocrisies imported by the whites*” (11).

habits that the white colonizers want to impose on the black populations. In *Batouala*, Maran would like to differentiate the African philosophy of life from European civilization, without affirming the superiority of one over the other. Seltzer's 1922 translation of the novel westernizes the narrative by applying occidental ethical standards and codes of decency to the description of a society which can consequently only be misrepresented.

As literary editor of the *Crisis*, Fauset had to take care of the promotion of the English version. In her article "'Batouala' is Translated," which appeared in the September 1922 issue of the magazine, she does not deny that the translator had to delete the passages which are too explicit. However, she minimizes the fact that every single allusion to sexuality has been expunged: "In order to get the book past the censor the translator has had to omit here an astonishing phrase, there a too vivid word, but this happens rarely" (219).<sup>135</sup> In addition to the examples discussed in this chapter, there are at least fifteen instances when the text is significantly altered. Fauset does not describe the process as it really is: a systematic erasure of every single sexual allusion. The massive expurgation of objectionable material seems to relieve her from the worries she expressed in the *World Tomorrow* a few months earlier. The novel, in its English version, perfectly fits in with the objectives of the *Crisis* magazine. It does not contain any allusion that could reinforce stereotypes about black people's sensual—and sexual—behavior. Although the civilization depicted in the translated version of the novel partly retains its exotic character, it can be presented to an American public without accentuating the prejudices of white readers.

Fauset claims that the focus of her article is "the technique of translation" (218).

However, she also proposes to the African American public a reading of the novel which

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<sup>135</sup> In his review of the translation, published in the *New York World* on 20 August 1922, Hubert Harrison offers a similar version: "Some of the details are a bit too strong for American stomachs. These have been omitted in the translation. But they are only a few, and they hardly amount to more than a couple of pages altogether" (336).

corresponds to the policy of the *Crisis* magazine. In her review, she insists on several negligible mistranslations. This attention to wording echoes the meticulous care that Maran displayed during the preparation of the novel. In a letter sent to his friend Gahisto on 21 January 1921, he explained how he checked every single word in order to make sure that the final text would express exactly what he wanted to describe. His attention to detail reflects his desire to present a faithful vision of African life. Fauset's apparent interest in accuracy hides something else. Insisting on the value of a correct translation, she states that "any novel which deals with the different usages between the races is bound to become a subject for propaganda" (218). Since the translated text has become acceptable for a large readership, the *Crisis* can justify and emphasize the importance of the book. Fauset draws black readers' attention to what she considers the strong point of *Batouala*: "what is bound to arrest the attention of the colored Americans is the excoriation by Maran in the preface and by his characters in the novel proper of the white colonial who has entered Africa and who has changed it so sadly" (219). Like Du Bois, she focuses on the propagandist aspect of the novel. The attack on colonization remains in her view the main reason to give *Batouala* the credit it deserves.

*Batouala* is a novel about African life—a quality underlined by Locke in his article on colonial literature. However, it was introduced to the black American readership, through magazines such as the *Crisis*, as a book written by an educated black man who denounced the injustice of the colonial system. Maran was portrayed in the United States as a living illustration of the black elite which, like the titanic figure of Atlas, carried the burden of the black race and the fate of all people of African descent.<sup>136</sup> The international reception of Maran's novel reinforced black intellectuals' awareness of a common racial struggle. It did

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<sup>136</sup> For example, in February 1922, in "The Horizon" section of the *Crisis*, a short notice portrayed him as a defender of the black race (175). Similarly, in the March issue of the same year, "The Looking Glass" section insisted on his brilliant results while he was at school in France (225-26).

not, however, directly result in a fruitful collaborative effort between the French and American black intelligentsia. The interests of both communities remained focused on the specific situations which they had to face in their respective countries. Du Bois, Locke and Jessie Fauset underlined aspects of the novel which would help in the advancement of their own agenda, without realizing that their interpretation misrepresented Maran's intent. They sought in the pages of *Batouala* a solution to their nationally-determined problems. The novel allowed them to extol the color-blind attitude of French institutions, through the award of the Goncourt prize, and to demonstrate that art could be used as propaganda in the struggle for racial equality—in the colonies as well as in the United States. It also provided them with an opportunity to distance themselves from the life depicted in the novel and, thus, to implicitly affirm the modernity of African Americans. The relationship of black Americans to their ancestral continent constituted perhaps the primordial concern of the Harlem Renaissance era. The reception of *Batouala* in the American black community already offered part of the answer. Yet it was only with the appearance of Locke's seminal anthology, *The New Negro*, that reflection on the legitimate questions around black people's geographical origin and its subsequent influence on the black diasporic community of the United States would receive a more comprehensive treatment.

## Chapter 2

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### Alain Locke's *The New Negro*: Locating the African American Community

On 15 October 1927, René Maran sent a letter to his friend, Alain Locke, in order to congratulate him for the publication of *The New Negro*.<sup>137</sup> He expressed in an enthusiastic tone the significance that the anthology had in his mind:

J'ai lu de bout en bout The New Negro. Je vous félicite chaleureusement, sincèrement, de tout cœur amical. Ce livre est, pour moi, comme un phare dont la lumière tournante, aux quatre horizons projetée, éclaire au loin l'avenir de notre race. Je pense que nos congénères des Etats-Unis le considèrent aussi comme tel, et qu'ils ont compris à plein l'acte de foi et l'immense cri d'espoir qu'il symbolise.<sup>138</sup>

In these lines, Maran heartily embraced the view expressed in the final essay of Locke's anthology. In "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," Du Bois noted with a certain satisfaction the progress that the black populations had made around the world. He advocated international emulation and explicitly defined the role of African Americans as guides to their black fellows: "This hundred and fifty millions of peoples are gaining slowly an intelligent thoughtful leadership. The main seat of their leadership is to-day the United States" (411).<sup>139</sup> In this statement, African Americans are considered the vanguard of the black race; they should therefore assume leadership in its worldwide liberation. From Maran's point of view, *The New Negro* crystallizes the hopes of the black populations scattered around the world. The author of *Batouala* recognizes Locke's volume as a determining step towards racial

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<sup>137</sup> *The New Negro* was published in December 1925 in the United States. For inexplicable reasons, it only seems to attract the French black intellectuals' attention by the end of 1927. Maran and Locke were corresponding since 1924, when *Les Continents* and *Opportunity* published an exchange of open letters between the two intellectuals. A letter from Maran, written on 25 July 1926, shows evidence that he had just received a copy of the anthology. It is therefore difficult to explain why Maran only claims he has read it thoroughly in October 1927. On 27 December 1927, Jane Nardal offered to translate *The New Negro* in French – see Edwards 16-20.

<sup>138</sup> "I have read The New Negro from beginning to end. I congratulate you warmly, sincerely, wholeheartedly. This book is, for me, like a beacon whose turning light, projected to the four horizons, illuminates the future of our race. I think that our colleagues in the United States also consider it as such, and that they have wholly grasped the act of faith and the immense cry of hope it symbolizes."

<sup>139</sup> Du Bois's "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" is quoted directly from *The New Negro*.

emancipation and implicitly asserts that people of African descent should turn to the black American community for guidance. His interpretation clearly positions the anthology in an international paradigm. The last sentence of his felicitations even suggests that he takes for granted that African Americans share his point of view.

Locke, however, did not seem to conceive *The New Negro* primarily in terms of international perspectives. His project gave priority to the assimilation of the black community into the American national life.<sup>140</sup> International concerns only came as a second site of preoccupations. Although Locke was aware that the changes which could be observed in America—and which were presented in the anthology—were taking place on a worldwide scale, the national space remained his primary point of focus. Bearing testament to the nascent black renaissance in the United States, *The New Negro* introduced American readers to the emergent generation of black talents. The idea for such a volume arose at the Civic Club dinner that Charles S. Johnson organized on March 24, 1924.<sup>141</sup> The occasion had been thoroughly planned. In *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981), David Levering Lewis underlines the role of Johnson in the preparation of the meeting: “The original idea has been an informal gathering to honor the publication of *There Is Confusion*, a novel by the literary editor of the *Crisis*, Jessie Fauset; Johnson had turned it into a well-advertised literary symposium” (89). In a letter to Locke, dated from 4 March 1924, he asked the Howard University professor to preside over the reception during which white and black patrons, intellectuals and art connoisseurs discussed the merits of African American writers’ recent achievements. During this memorable evening, Paul Kellogg, editor of the *Survey Graphic*, offered to dedicate an

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<sup>140</sup> Many scholars have emphasized the ‘Americanism’ of *The New Negro* – see, among others, Huggins, 56-60; Baker, 71-81; Gates, “The Trope of a New Negro” (1988), 147-49; Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 399-403; Lemke, 117-24.

<sup>141</sup> An account of the evening, “The Debut of the Younger School of Negro Writers,” appeared in *Opportunity* in May 1924. For other accounts of the event, see Ethel Ray Nance, “The New York Arts Renaissance” (1968); Patrick J. Gilpin, “Charles S. Johnson” (1972); David Levering Lewis, 92-95; Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance*, 390-92; Cheryl A. Wall, “Histories and Heresies” (2001), 59-62; Eric King Watts, *Hearing the Hurt* (2012), 77-79.

issue of the journal to Harlem, in particular, and the African American community, in general. Johnson entrusted Locke to supervise its publication and, in March 1925, the special number entitled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* came out. Its success was beyond expectations since forty-two thousand copies were distributed.<sup>142</sup> In April of the same year, Alain Locke secured a publishing contract with Albert and Charles Boni and *The New Negro* appeared in book form in December 1925.<sup>143</sup> It had a reasonable success on the market: three thousand and sixty-three copies were sold in the first two years. This number would reach four thousand five hundred and thirty-five copies by the end of 1931.<sup>144</sup>

From *The Survey Graphic* issue to the printed volume, the preparation of *The New Negro* was however a quite complicated process. Locke's correspondence with the contributors attests that many participants disagreed with the way he managed the project. For example, on October 7, 1924, Claude McKay sent him an injurious letter because of his refusal to include a poem entitled "Mulatto" in the *Survey Graphic* issue. The Jamaican author left no doubt about his anger: "It isn't the 'Survey' that hasn't guts enough. It is you. The Survey editor would not mind . . . No wonder the Negro movement is in such a bad way . . . When Negro intellectuals like you take such a weak line!" He continued in a threatening tone: "if you do publish any of the other poems now and leave out 'Mulatto' after this protest you may count me as an intellectual enemy for life." Although not all of the contributors were as expressive as McKay, some of them showed reluctance when being asked to participate in the project and tried to impose their views as to what the book should contain. Du Bois, for example, in a letter dated from May 13, 1925, required that Jessie Fauset, who had not contributed to the *Survey Graphic* issue, be included in *The New Negro*: "I should not feel at

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<sup>142</sup> See Richard A. Long, 16; David Levering Lewis, 115; and Lemke, 120.

<sup>143</sup> The publishing contract for *The New Negro* was signed on Apr. 22, 1925. This item appears under the mention "Boni, Albert and Charles" in the bibliography.

<sup>144</sup> These numbers are taken from a royalty statement sent to Alain Locke by Albert and Charles Boni, Inc. in Dec. 31, 1931. This item appears under the mention "Boni, Albert and Charles" in the bibliography.

all like contributing to a volume unless Miss Fauset should appear in the book you are projecting.” Locke accepted the proposition, but his correspondence with the literary editor of the *Crisis* illustrates their difficulties to reach an agreement on the content of the essay. In a letter written on August 18, 1925, Fauset complained about the lack of information she had received: “I was very disappointed in your note because I had hoped that it would contain suggestions as to the treatment, length and general trend of the article which you suggested.” Locke’s reply coldly reminded her that he did not intend to do the job in her stead: “I could have given more of an idea of what I have in mind, but it was to be your essay.” These contentions would result in a long-term resentment which surfaces again in a letter from January 9, 1933 in which Fauset blatantly denounced Locke’s attitude: “My dear Alain, your malice, your lack of true discrimination and above all your tendency to play safe with the grand white folks renders you anything but a reliable critic.”<sup>145</sup> These epistolary exchanges hint at the difficulties that Locke encountered in his preparation of *The New Negro*. They also cast a light on the inevitable tensions that pervaded the African American community during a period when a display of unity seemed to be more than a necessity. In “The Book that Launched the Harlem Renaissance,” Rampersad remarks that, “eventually, several of the contributors of *The New Negro* broke with Locke.” He immediately adds that their collaboration, however strained, nonetheless resulted in the publication of “a landmark in African-American cultural history” (88).<sup>146</sup> The anthology indeed presented an unprecedented investigation into black American life and paved the way for the acceptance of a group, which had been marginalized throughout American history, as an integral part of the nation.

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<sup>145</sup> Fauset also resented the fact that she was put in the shade of Locke at the Civic Club dinner, which was to be organized in honor of her novel’s publication. In the same letter, she bitterly recalls the event: “I still remember the consummate cleverness with which you that night as a toast-master strove to keep speech and comment away from the person for whom the occasion was meant.” This point has to be taken into account as well in order to understand the growing enmity between Fauset and Locke – see also Wall, 60.

<sup>146</sup> This article is a slightly reworked version of the introduction to the 1997 edition of *The New Negro*.

In *The New Negro*, the presentation of the African American community is drawn along two lines of inquiry: culture and sociology. This approach reflects the background and strategy of Charles S. Johnson, editor of the *Opportunity* magazine, who, according to David Levering Lewis, was the discreet architect of the whole project.<sup>147</sup> It also corresponds to Locke's belief in an aestheticized solution to the race problem. In *Primitivist Modernism* (1998), Lemke emphasizes the two orientations which divide the anthology into a first segment, "devoted to aesthetics," and a second part, "concerned with social and political questions" (119). Between the *Survey Graphic* issue and the publication of *The New Negro*, the two sections had in fact been interchanged. Whereas the sociological essays, more in accordance with the usual content of the magazine, came first in the *Survey Graphic*, they were relegated to the last section of the printed book. The literary material and cultural debates were not only given a more prominent place in the anthology, they were also substantially augmented by the adjunction of many of the texts that had won the *Opportunity* literary prizes awarded in May 1925. Lewis ends the second chapter of *When Harlem Was in Vogue* by describing *The New Negro* as "an expanded and much polished presentation of poetry and prose spun off by the *Opportunity* contest and *Survey Graphic*" (117). Divided between the determination to launch an artistic movement and empirical studies of a sociological reality, the volume tries to reconcile an aesthetic vision of blackness with everyday life in black America. Underlining the subjacent tension between these two poles, Lemke astutely asserts that "while the most frequently used keywords of [the second] section are 'progressive' and 'modern,' the keyword in the anthology's first section is 'primitive'" (119). Starting from Du Bois's dilemma of double-consciousness, *The New Negro* attempted

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<sup>147</sup> See Lewis, 45-49.

to explore the African facet of the black people living in the United States at the same time as it decisively confirmed their Americanness.

The idea of Africa formed an obsessive interrogation for African Americans at the time. Central to the debates around black arts, this question was often marred with conflicting feelings. The anxieties that surrounded the reception of *Batouala* in America illustrate this feeling of unease. Africa nonetheless remained an essential aspect of the definition of American black culture.<sup>148</sup> In *Links and Bridges*, Ikonné describes the adoption of African motifs by black American artists as “an apparatus of self-definition” (85). Considered as the ancestral land, it becomes an important space of self-understanding for African Americans. Baker mentions the necessity “to recall sounds of African origin” in the attempts to establish “a mode of *sounding* reality that is identifiably and self-consciously black and empowering” (71). The omnipresence of African themes formed the backdrop against which black American artists and intellectuals tried to define and orient black artistic creations in the United States.

Those questions were certainly not elided in the pages of Locke’s anthology. Representations of Africa in *The New Negro* oscillate between two concepts that Lemke develops in her introduction to *Primitivist Modernism*: ‘cultural primitivism’ and ‘aesthetic primitivism.’ The former is “the romanticization of non-Western peoples, usually idealizing their instincts, sexuality, and their proclivity to the natural,” while the latter “is based on the assimilation of non-European art forms” (26). The underlying idea behind these concepts is that primitive people and primitive art form can revive a modern society entangled in an

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<sup>148</sup> In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Gates defines African American culture as a variation of an African vernacular tradition: “Afro-American culture is an African culture with a difference as signified by the catalysts of English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish languages and cultures, which informed the precise structures that each discrete New World Pan-African culture assumed” (4). The theoretical model he puts forward in this seminal work concurs with Glissant’s idea of the trace and his theory of ‘creolization’ – see Glissant, *Poétique du Divers*, 16-19.

increasing mechanization and a paralyzing standardization. Rather than two types of primitivism, however, I contend that *The New Negro* looks at Africa through two different lenses. It thus offers a primitivist vision and an ethnographic gaze. On the one hand, black people's unique artistic sensitivity becomes a recurrent theme of the anthology. Their emotional expressiveness proceeds from their African origins and bears witness to their inherent primitiveness. The contributors repeatedly attribute to people of African descent certain qualities, supposedly essential to their constitution, which emphasize their instinctual nature.<sup>149</sup> On the other hand, *The New Negro* proposes a scholarly approach to Africa's ancient culture. African art is presented as a classical tradition, which still has to be scrutinized and interpreted in order to reveal its secrets. These two vantage points, in apparent contradiction, serve different purposes in the anthology. Whereas primitivism meets the expectations of the 'Negro' vogue, the anthropologic approach to Africa attempts to encourage a sense of respect among intellectuals and to develop a feeling of confidence and pride among African Americans.

It is the aim of this chapter to interrogate the ways in which the anthology deals with the construction of Africa in relation to its broadest intent to situate the black American community at the heart of the nation's life. In his contribution to *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance* (2006), John C. Charles asserts that "Locke's early Africanist discourse attempts to reach beyond the boundaries of the nation, yet it remains anchored exclusively in Western, especially American, thought and objectives" (52).<sup>150</sup> I would like to argue in this chapter

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<sup>149</sup> This gesture situates Locke's anthology within the modernist project which developed at the time ideas about essential black primitiveness as the panacea to a desiccated western world – see Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism*; Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire*; North, *Dialect of Modernism*; Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject* (2004); Gina M. Rossetti, *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature* (2006); Emily Bernard, "The Renaissance and the Vogue" (2007).

<sup>150</sup> Charles's article focuses exclusively on Locke's early essays without considering *The New Negro* as a whole. He includes Locke's four contributions to the anthology in the corpus of texts he analyses. Although the approach is slightly different, his observations can also be applied to the context of *The New Negro's* publication.

that, more than a tentative undertaking to go beyond an American perspective, the transnational gestures towards Africa in *The New Negro* reinforce the assimilation of the African American community within the western world, in general, and the United States in particular. Allusions to the ancestral continent in Locke's anthology forms a network of references which serves to define African American identity as a constituent part of the American nation. The Southern part of the country and the European continent constitute, as we will see, intermediary stages which allow black American artists to establish a connection with their place of origin. *The New Negro* deploys a series of trajectories which lead, through an African detour, to the assimilation of the black population of the United States to their immediate socio-cultural environment.

### **The New American Negro**

The two opening texts of *The New Negro* are revealing of a desire to locate the African American community on the national map of the United States. In the first sentence of the foreword, Locke makes the anthology's ambitions national; he announces that "this volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially,—to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro *in America* that have so significantly taken place in the last few years" (xxv).<sup>151</sup> To account for the evolution of black experience in the United States appears to be the main purpose of the 452-page long volume. In the initial essay of the anthology, "The New Negro," Locke sketches the rapid evolution of the black population during the first decades of the century. Evoking the Great Migration, he interprets it as "a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern"

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<sup>151</sup> My italics – For practical reasons, I refer in the thesis to the 1997 reproduction of *The New Negro* featuring an introduction by Arnold Rampersad. Except for the front matter, the page numbers are identical to the 1925 original edition.

(6).<sup>152</sup> This temporal and spatial movement takes place within the confines of the national space. It is the transformation of the ‘Old Negro’ into a ‘New Negro,’ but it is also the transition from pre-war America to a modern nation. James Donald, in *Some of These Days* (2015), frames the ‘Negro Renaissance’ in its temporal context as well as in its specific location within the national territory: “The Harlem experiment posed the question of what it meant ‘to be a Negro,’ and, more specifically, what it meant to be a metropolitan Negro in the postwar United States” (31). In “The New Negro,” as well as in the foreword, Locke emphasizes the contemporaneity and the geographical proximity of the group he describes in the anthology in order to reinforce its visibility in American society.

The integration of the black population into American social life is presented throughout the volume as an undeniable fact. Melville Herskovits’s contribution, significantly titled “The Negro’s Americanism,” underlines the fact that African Americans “have absorbed the culture of America” (359). The essay gives multiple evidence of the extent to which Harlem displays socio-cultural patterns comparable to those observed in other typically American communities. Herskovits concludes his analysis with the satisfactory observation that “all racial and social elements in our population who live here long enough become acculturated, Americanized in the truest sense of the word, eventually” (360).<sup>153</sup> The process of assimilation successfully leads to a sort of homogenization. The African American group is not an exception to the rule. In “The Negro Pioneers,” Paul Kellogg describes the recent transformations of the African American community as “an induction into the heritage of the

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<sup>152</sup> The Great Migration forms the backdrop to *The New Negro*. Stewart underlines the important link between the literary movement presented by Locke and the northward movement of the black rural populations: “Locke added his distinctive signature to the portrait of the New Negro by linking the younger generation of black writers to the Great Migration of hundreds of thousands of blacks leaving the South and coming to the North during World War I. For Locke, there were two New Negroes – the poor black masses changing the geography of American citizenship, and the young black writers reflecting that energy in literature” (15). As we will see later in this chapter, the connection to the South is an essential element for the African American community’s cultural claim.

<sup>153</sup> With this statement, Herskovits situates the race problem in the United States at the heart of the debates on immigration and Americanization.

national tradition, a baptism of the American spirit that slavery cheated him out of” (277). Comparing the Great Migration to other movements of populations which have marked the history of the United States—the “pushing back of the Western frontier in the first half of the last century” and “the waves of immigration which have swept in from overseas in the last half” (271), he praises the black community’s “vigorous spirit of individual initiative which we like to associate with American character” (274).<sup>154</sup> These two essays exemplify the desire, omnipresent in *The New Negro*, to acknowledge the black community’s full assimilation of American habits and mentality.

However, the anthology does not only report the social adaptation of African Americans; it also illustrates a desire to contribute to the cultural development of the nation. In *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Lewis explains that, in the United States, the artistic field had been protected from racism: “No exclusionary rules had been laid down regarding a place in the arts.” Locke clearly intended to take advantage of this “small crack in the wall of racism” (48).<sup>155</sup> Indeed, his purpose is explicitly defined in “The New Negro”: he demands that the African American artist “becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of beneficiary and ward for that of collaborator and participant in American civilization” (15). The insistence on the need for black Americans to be recognized as cultural agents is one of the central preoccupations of *The New Negro*. Locke stresses the necessity of a collaboration between black and white artists.<sup>156</sup> He asserts the importance of interracial contacts in the evolution of American culture: “this reopening of intellectual contacts has centered in New York and has been richly fruitful not merely in the enlarging of personal experience, but in the

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<sup>154</sup> This passage recalls Bourne’s rhetoric in “Trans-National America” when he stresses “the pioneer spirit and a sense of new social vistas” of its inhabitants (121).

<sup>155</sup> Lewis is speaking about C. S. Johnson’s strategy. It can be assumed that Locke adopted the same point of view.

<sup>156</sup> In “Negro Art and America,” Barnes echoes Locke’s argument and pleads for “a working alliance with us [white Americans] for the development of a richer American civilization to which he [the Negro] will contribute his full share” (25).

definite enrichment of American art and letters” (10). More than any other place in America, New York seems to embody collaborative possibilities between white and black Americans, which would result in the enhancement of American literary traditions. However, the whole nation can benefit from the input of the emergent black American artists.<sup>157</sup>

Several contributions to *The New Negro* attest to the impact of African Americans on the cultural evolution of the country. The South, as we will see in the second part of this chapter, plays an essential role in the rehabilitation of the black community’s participation in American society. However, the anthology does not focalize on a regionalist perspective and, throughout its pages, cultural life is understood as a national phenomenon. People of African descent have a share in the development of American culture and they now seek recognition for their contribution, which has too often been underestimated. In his contribution, William Stanley Braithwaite demonstrates the importance of black individuals in American literature both as a subject matter and active creators. Similarly, Montgomery Gregory, in his essay on theater, illustrates the attempts of African American actors and writers to enter “the mainstream of American drama” (157). He advocates the creation of “a national Negro Theater” and claims the black artist’s legitimacy to have his own voice: “he alone can truly express the soul of his people” (159). African Americans aspire to control the means of racial representations and be able to create their own art.

On the one hand, black artists would like to play a role on the American scene. On the other hand, they claim an artistic distinctiveness which contrasts with the idea of a unified national aesthetic. In the opening lines of his essay, Gregory proposes a vision of the United

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<sup>157</sup> In *Ellis Island Nation*, Fleepler affirms that a similar strategy, which he calls ‘contributionism,’ was used to facilitate the integration of the immigrants: “The contributionist ideology suggested that recent immigrants brought important cultural and economic benefits to the country and strengthened the nation” (2). His book retraces the struggle, between 1924 and 1965, which led to a wide acceptance of this point of view. He nonetheless remarks that such a strategy could be observed throughout American history.

States which strongly recalls Bourne's perspective in "Trans-National America," and which clarifies the apparently contradictory demands of the African American population: "America should not be a 'melting-pot' for the diverse races gathered on her soil but that each race should maintain its essential integrity and contribute its own special and peculiar gift to our composite civilization: not a 'melting-pot' but a symphony where each instrument contributes its particular quality of music to an ensemble of harmonious sounds" (153). The national culture presented in *The New Negro* allows for differences and distinctions. Black people can simultaneously participate in American cultural life and highlight the specificity of their contribution.

Langston Hughes's famous poem, "I, Too," which appears in the poetry section, echoes this point of view. The first line presents the black speaker as a creator: "I, too, sing America" (145). Contesting to others the exclusive right to celebrate the nation, he affirms his active role in the elaboration of national imagery. Two longer stanzas then describe the present segregation and the future emancipation of the black artist. The insistence on the beauty of the speaker in the line which follows this narrative part underlines the aesthetic concern of the poet: "they'll see how beautiful I am" (145). The right to self-representation is at the heart of the poet's plea, which concludes with an affirmation of the black American merging into the nation: "I, too, am America" (145). The syntactic structure of the opening and closing lines emphasizes the individuality of the poetical voice at the same time as it asserts its participation to the broader ensemble of the nation. The first-person speaker is indeed grammatically separated from the American nation to which he claims to belong. These two verses are also connected to each other through a link of causality. It is because of his contribution to American culture, expressed in the first line of the poem, that the speaker can claim his sense of belonging in the final verse. African Americans have a right to

participate to the political and social life of the United States since they are contributing to its cultural development.

In a different mood, John Matheus's "Fog" simultaneously stresses the demographic diversity of the United States and the universal bond of humanity which links its citizens. The short-story relates an incident taking place on a railroad bridge crossing the Ohio River: the occupants of a streetcar have to evacuate the transport while the platform threatens to crumble. In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Hutchinson describes the passengers of the vehicle as "a microcosm of the United States" (405). Matheus hints at the diversity of the inhabitants of the city, in which the story unfolds, at the beginning of the narrative, when he describes the fog which enables "citizens to tread their way homeward without recognizing their neighbor ten feet ahead, whether he might be Jew or Gentile, Negro or Pole, Slav, Croatian, Italian or one hundred per cent American" (86). The group of passengers displays a similar diversity. After the incident, safe and sound on the Ohio bank, they become aware of the futility of their prejudices. A group of white men, on their way to an anti-immigration meeting, finally decide not to go on with their plan: "from about the hearts and minds of some rough, unlettered men another fog had begun to lift" (95). This suggests that racism can be avoided if, in spite of focusing on differences, people start to look at their commonalities. Matheus hints, as Hutchinson notes, at "the possibility of a multiethnic American future," where the different nationalities which compose the American nation cohabit in harmony (406). Every group, whether defined through national or racial categories, has a contribution to make to the development of the country and, thus, enhance its prestige abroad.

Locke frames the international gestures which punctuate *The New Negro* as part of the national enterprise. Although he asserts the role of African Americans as "the advanced-guard of African peoples in their contact with Twentieth Century civilization," he clearly positions

his volume and the reflections it proposes into a discussion on national perspectives (14). Playing with the title of Du Bois's resolutely international essay, he claims that "the Negro mind reaches out as yet to nothing but American wants, American ideas" (11-12). The main purpose of the anthology is to raise the American audience's awareness of the throbbing community that lives in their midst. In the foreword, Locke calls attention to the black intellectual elite's awareness of and desire to participate in the contemporary debates on the meaning of American identity: "America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfaction and objectives" (xxvi). It is interesting to note that Locke here subtly implies the existence of two separate cultures within the United States. He insists on the equivalence of their endeavor and simultaneously posits the existence of a distinct 'Negro' culture. In *Primitivist Modernism*, Lemke affirms that "these two claims, of cultural uniqueness and of cultural sameness, are the two unreconciled—and paradoxical—strivings at the heart of *The New Negro*" (123-24). The allusion to Du Bois's famous passage on double-consciousness puts the anthology into perspective. Locke wants to assert black people's racial background—the connection with Africa—without forsaking the aspiration to be part of American society. He believes that a reassessment of the relation to Africa would empower African American artists and intellectuals, and allow them to offer a valuable contribution to American arts. Representations of Africa in *The New Negro* are subordinated to the primary objective of national assimilation. The South plays a pivotal role in this quest. In *The New Negro*, it constitutes both a location of rootedness within the United States and a pathway to the ancestral continent.

### **Southern Roots: American and African Histories**

In the opening sentence of “The Negro Digs up his Past,” Arthur A. Schomburg affirms that “the American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (231). In his opinion, a reassessment of history appears to be a necessity for African Americans in order to face the challenges that inevitably stem from modern American society. From close memories of slavery to the long-forgotten history of Africa, they have to rediscover the trajectory which brought them to America, and to come to terms with the problems that arise from such an investigation. The main body of Schomburg’s essay is concerned with a recent exhibition at Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, where manuscripts authored by African Americans were displayed alongside a broader collection of documents pertaining to the history of black people in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe. For him, the conclusion that emanates from the exposed evidence is obvious: “when we consider the facts, certain chapters of American history will have to be reopened” (234). African Americans not only have to reassess their relation to the past, they have to take an active part in a more comprehensive and genuine transcription of history. Calling for “the rewriting of many important paragraphs of our common American history,” Schomburg delineates an essential field of research for the African American historians: they have to create a version of American history which respects the role of black people in the construction of the nation (232). This quest for the recognition of an historical and cultural participation begins in the southern part of the United States. Seen as a pivotal space of African American history, the South stands for the place of birth of black culture in the United States and forms a direct, almost tangible, backdrop against which African American identity has been defined.

In the initial essay of *The New Negro*, Locke ascertains the importance of this space in the development of black artistic expression:

It must be increasingly recognized that the Negro has already made very substantial contributions, not only in his folk-art, music especially, which has always found appreciation, but in larger, though humbler and less acknowledged ways. For

generations the Negro has been the peasant matrix of that section of America which has most undervalued him, and here he has contributed not only materially in labor and in social patience, but spiritually as well. The South has unconsciously absorbed the gift of his folk-temperament (15).

Locke does not detail the form and characteristics of the black cultural contribution in the South. He nevertheless affirms its existence and traces its origin to the lower class of the population. Black people have played a role in the economic and social construction of the South, but their more important input is cultural, or, to use Locke's terminology, spiritual. Charles insists, in his contribution to *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance*, on the importance, for Locke, of "the valorization of the folk" which posits the masses as "the bearers of an authentic culture" (42).<sup>158</sup> Although not always officially recognized, black folk culture has already been incorporated into American culture.

Music, as the above quotation shows, is the first idea that seems to come to Locke's mind as an example of a recognized and appreciated form of art produced by African Americans. The last part of the "Negro Youth Speaks" section is dedicated to the analysis of this artistic medium. It consists in two theoretical essays framed by the contrapuntal insertions of poems composed by Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett and Langston Hughes, and of two reproductions of spirituals, excerpted from Henry Edward Krehbiel's *Afro-American Folksongs* (1914) and Natalie Curtis-Burlin's *Negro Folk-Songs* (1918).<sup>159</sup> In his essay entitled "The Negro Spirituals," Locke underlines the American-ness of black folk music: "the song of the Negro is America's folk-song" (199). Narrating the black experience in the United States, these musical pieces are nonetheless typical of the region where they first appeared: "the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro make them

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<sup>158</sup> Charles connects this aspect of Locke's thought to his studies in Europe in the 1910s—at the University of Oxford and Berlin—and his reading of the work of Johann Herder (42).

<sup>159</sup> The poems are McKay's "Negro Dancers"—an ensemble of three sonnets, Bennett's "Song," and Hughes's "Jazzonia," and "Nude Young Dancer." The folk songs are titled "Father Abraham: 'Tell It'" (Krehbiel 90) and "Listen to de Lambs" (Curtis-Bullin 24-26).

at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them” (199). J. A. Rogers, in “Jazz at Home,” follows the same line of thought. Asserting the black dimension of this music, he also underlines the influence of the country in which it has been born: “it is of Negro origin plus the influence of the American environment. It is Negro-American” (219). He establishes jazz as a contemporary American art form and draws a parallel with iconic symbols of American culture: “it ranks with the movie and the dollar as a foremost exponent of modern Americanism” (216). The African American contribution to the United States cannot be more frankly ascertained. When trying to retrace the genealogy of this musical craze, Rogers distinguishes two specific cities: Memphis and Chicago. Without mentioning it, he sketches one of the essential events which frame the discussion within *The New Negro*: the Great Migration.

If African American culture emerged in the southern part of the nation, the northward movement of thousands of black people during and after World War I favored its diffusion to the whole country and, at the same time, modified some of its characteristics. From a rural culture, it evolved to become an urban phenomenon. Many essays in *The New Negro* try to grasp the significance of this mass exodus. In the opening article, Locke attempts to show the extent to which, “in the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed” (6). In “The New Frontage on American Life,” Charles S. Johnson painstakingly studies the impact of this transformation from a sociological point of view. He notes that “a new type of Negro is evolving—a city Negro” (285). With urbanization comes acculturation and it is not surprising that, in “Harlem: the Culture Capital,” James Weldon Johnson chooses to focus on “the greatest Negro city in the world” (301). His essay concentrates on the historical development of the neighborhood, and the financial and professional opportunities it provides. It nevertheless includes in its conclusion a cultural note. Johnson indeed predicts that “Harlem will become the intellectual, the cultural and the financial center for Negroes of

the United States, and will exert a vital influence upon all Negro peoples” (311). To stress the modernity of the ‘New Negro’ may seem to relegate the southern part of the country to the past. However, contrary to what Mark Andrew Huddle claims in “Harlem, the ‘New Negro,’ and the South” (2008), the region remains in the background of *The New Negro* and is still celebrated as the cradle of black culture in the United States.<sup>160</sup>

The observation of the Great Migration and the analysis of the spirit it fosters take into account the difficulties of adaptation that stem from an unknown environment.<sup>161</sup> Rudolph Fisher incorporates into his prose the obstacles inherent to the adjustment to an unfamiliar setting. “Vestiges” is a series of short stories that deal with different aspects of the experience of migration.<sup>162</sup> The first story follows Ezekiel Taylor, “preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (75), when he comes to New York in order to meet up with his parishioners who have moved to the city and are deceived by an opportunistic minister more interested in profit than in the salvation of their souls. The second narrative exposes the conflict that arises between Majutah, a young woman who decides to forsake religion in order to revel in the nightly pleasures of the city, and her grandmother, who tries to remain faithful to her old principles and to convince her grandchild to persevere in religious practice. In the third text, Anna’s father argues with his wife about the usefulness of sending their daughter northward to get an education. When she arrives announcing jubilantly that she is accepted at Columbia Teachers College, he cannot do anything but cast away his worries and rejoice at the news. Finally, the last story follows Pete and Lucky as they enter a religious revival simply expecting to attend a

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<sup>160</sup> In his article, “Harlem, the ‘New Negro,’ and the South,” Huddle claims that “to the image-conscious Locke, the focus on a lingering South was inappropriate if one was going to effectively and successfully market a *new Negro*” (258). According to him, *The New Negro* attempted to erase the southern backdrop against which the Harlem Renaissance developed.

<sup>161</sup> Charles S. Johnson, in “The New Frontage on American Life,” presents a sociological perspective on the subject. He tries to account for the “social disorientation” and the “reorganization of attitudes” which result from the important shift from the rural South to the urban North (287).

<sup>162</sup> The last part of Brown’s *Southern Road* is also entitled “Vestiges.” Although it is difficult to know whether the intertextual reference is conscious or not, the idea of a southern culture which needs to be preserved and the problematic of northward migration forms the backdrop of both works.

show and laugh at the expense of the participants. Lucky leaves the tent in the middle of the sermon, moved by the words of the preacher. When Pete asks for an explanation, he simply answers: “‘Dam’ ‘f I know what it is—maybe because it makes me think of the old folks or somethin’—but—hell—it just sorter—gets me” (84). In all these short stories, the nostalgia of the South forms the backdrop against which the Great Migration takes place. Significantly, in *The Survey Graphic*, Fisher’s stories were entitled “The South Lingers on” (644-47) as if to suggest the persistence of this region both as a geographical place of origin and as a symbol of identity. In *The New Negro*, the title, “Vestiges,” evokes the fragmentary dimension of remote memories.<sup>163</sup> Recalling with nostalgia the subjacent presence of the South, it also suggests that this legacy is under threat of sinking into oblivion.

Jean Toomer’s contribution to the volume, consisting of two short stories and two poems, is an ode to the southern countryside and its fading culture and history: “Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet / To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone, / Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone” (137).<sup>164</sup> The nostalgia that pervades these texts contributes to the construction of the South as a place of memory and heritage. To reconnect with their roots, African Americans need to come back to the soil that they first touched when they arrived from Africa. The rediscovery of the African heritage has to begin by a reappraisal of their place in the history of the United States and of their position within its culture. It is activated by a symbolic return to the South. The nostalgic tone of Fisher’s and Toomer’s texts fixes it in a sort of timelessness and consecrates it as an immutable place of origin. Located

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<sup>163</sup> Only one story from “The South Lingers On” has been omitted in *The New Negro*. It illustrates the prejudices against migrant Southerners among urban black people. Locke’s exclusion of this narrative illustrates his desire to emphasize the unity of the African American community.

<sup>164</sup> The short stories, “Carma” and “Fern,” and the poems, “Georgia Dusk” and “Song of the Son” are taken from Toomer’s 1923 publication, *Cane*. The verses quoted here form the last lines of the third stanza of “Song of the Son.”

within the American territory, it roots the African American community in the United States and gives it a legitimacy in the cultural life of the nation.

In “Carma,” Toomer subtly reminds the readers of the link which also exists between the South and the ancestral continent: “The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa” (97). Linked to the South, black culture in the United States resonates with African echoes. Several essays in *The New Negro* emphasize this connection. Locke hints at “the African component” of the Negro Spirituals (206). Arthur Huff Fauset contends that the African American folk tale is part of the cultural baggage that the black slaves brought from their homeland: “these stories, or their types at least, came with the Negro from Africa where they had existed for centuries” (243).<sup>165</sup> In his contribution on jazz, Rogers presents the character of black music as a legacy of the ancestral continent: “The direct predecessor of jazz is ragtime. That both are atavistically African there is little doubt, but to what extent it is difficult to determine” (217).<sup>166</sup> It is important to understand that these gestures towards an African origin hint at a certain idea of the ancient continent. Rogers explains that jazz “is a release of all the suppressed emotions at once.” He develops his thought by drawing a parallel between African American music and the unrestrained choreographies he attributes to primitive black tribes: “In its barbaric rhythm and exuberance there is something of the bamboula, a wild abandoned dance of the West African and the Haytian [sic] Negro . . . or of the *ganza* ceremony so brilliantly depicted in Maran’s *Batouala*” (217-18). His knowledge of

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<sup>165</sup> A brief story, “told by Cugo Lewis, Plateau, Alabama,” but “brought to American from West Coast Africa,” follows Fauset’s article and supports his argument (245). It also implicitly underline the tradition of orality which kept these folktales alive. This recalls the idea of the ‘trace’ that Glissant develops throughout his work – see Glissant, *Poétique du Divers*, 16-17; *Le Discours antillais* 26-27, 678-79; *Poétique de la Relation* 17-21. The story would be reprinted in *La Revue du monde noir* in February 1932.

<sup>166</sup> We have seen that Rogers qualifies jazz as “Negro-American,” hence his hesitation when defining to what extent Africa has influenced it (219). He also presents jazz as a universal type of folk music and dance. He compares it to “the Highland fling, the Irish jig, the Cossack dance,” and so on (217). Similarly, Arthur Huff Fauset confirms that “Negro Folk Lore is a genuine part of world folk literature” (243). In *The New Negro*, the connection of black American culture to Africa seems to bring it to a universal level of comprehension, on a par with other cultures of the world.

Africa is part of an imagined vision, based notably on Maran's novel. To link African American forms of expression to the ancient continent means to underline their redeeming primitiveness. Brought from Africa to the South during the era of slavery, a primordial spontaneity, expressed through unhindered emotions, allegedly pervades black American culture. For African American artists, a spiritual return to the South constitutes a pathway to Africa.

In Schomburg's essay, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," it is interesting to note that even if the text is not primarily concerned with Africa, an illustration entitled "African Phantasy: Awakening" by Winold Reiss, inserted at the midpoint of the argument, suggests the ancestral land as a necessary background to understand the ongoing discussion.<sup>167</sup> In his conclusion, after pondering on the significance of the black participation in American history and, more generally, in world history, Schomburg finally affirms the importance of a rediscovery of African culture:

The Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture. But a new notion of the cultural attainment and potentialities of the African stocks has recently come about, partly through the corrective influence of the more scientific study of African institutions and early cultural history, partly through growing appreciation of the skill and beauty and in many cases the historical priority of the African native crafts, and finally through the signal recognition which first in France and Germany, but now very generally, the astonishing art of the African sculptures has received (237).

Schomburg postulates that history is necessarily coextensive with culture. The recent development in the fields of anthropology and the adoption by European artists of African motifs help black Americans to develop a new sense of self-understanding. The rediscovery of a glorious African past does not only impact their quest for identity on a personal level, it also allows the whole community to find a place within American society. Deprived of historical presence because of their pretended non-existent past—and therefore their lack of

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<sup>167</sup> The drawings by Winold Reiss only appear in the 1925 edition. They do not bear any page number.

an original culture, they need to recreate a distinct cultural voice in order to contribute actively to the life of the nation in which they live. In *Some of These Days*, Donald insists on “the rediscovery or, more accurately, the creation through reimagining, of a black history, which would help to authorize a modern, American nationhood with an African thread woven inextricably through it” (35). This quest for a historical and cultural identity is essential for African Americans and the study of African culture, discovered through the South in a first phase, allows them to develop a sense of belonging, to reclaim a forgotten culture, and to recover their African past.

### **Primitive Fantasies of Africa**

In a society fraught with racial stereotypes, the connection to Africa can however be problematic. Although, in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Hutchinson underscores “a more acute historical consciousness as well as a partial disengagement from the sort of exotic primitivism” which pervades the artistic scene both in Paris and New York, he remarks that “*The New Negro* is not entirely free of such fantasies” (399). Some poems presented in the anthology subscribe to this kind of exotic visions. In “Nude Young Dancer,” for example, Hughes depicts the instinctive and sensual nature of a jazz dancer. The nakedness of the young woman, only mentioned in the title, suggests an atmosphere of sensuality. The first two lines conflates images of Africa and impressions of the cabaret: “What jungle tree have you slept under, / Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?” (227). While the evocation of the jungle suggests the African wilderness, the lively music resonating in the depths of the night clearly brings to mind the high-spirited scene of Harlem. As if to reinforce the sensual dimension of the scene, in the second stanza, the speaker jealously questions the hypothetical relationships of the young woman as she moves to the rhythm of jazz: “What star-white moon has been your lover? / To what mad faun have you offered your lips?” (227).

These two lines activate fantasies about permissive black women, which seem to confirm the reputation of Harlem cabaret.<sup>168</sup>

The idea of untamed passions as typical of black people also appears in Cullen's poetic contribution. "Fruit of the Flower" explores the role of heredity in the transmission of these atavistic traits. The poem presents as biologically inherited the speaker's impulse "To do a naked tribal dance / Each time he hears the rain" (132). Although the poem maintains a subjective tone and does not claim to present a universal character, it reinforces the idea of a black emotional specificity. A similar proposition appears in "Heritage," the famous poem in which the poet ponders on the significance of the African continent:

So I lie, who never quite  
Safely sleep from rain at night  
While its primal measures drip  
Through my body, crying, 'Strip!  
Doff this new exuberance,  
Come and dance the Lover's Dance.'  
In an old remembered way  
Rain works on me night and day.  
Though three centuries removed  
From the scenes my fathers loved (251-52).

Despite the evocation of the irremediable rupture—expressed in its temporal dimension, which severed black people from the land of origin, these lines assert the black speaker's primitive nature. The poem could be read as an illustration of and a meditation on Du Bois's 'unreconciled strivings.' On the one hand, the speaker can hardly repress the impulses inherited from his African ancestry. The reference to *Batouala's* 'dance of love' as the paroxysm of his temptation suggests a desire to yield to natural impulses.<sup>169</sup> On the other hand, the speaker attempts to reject the traces of a heathen past; he affirms his Christian faith,

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<sup>168</sup> The poem is printed next to another poem by Langston Hughes, "Jazzonia," which evokes the atmosphere of a Harlem cabaret. The readers would probably imagine a similar setting for the scene depicted in "Young Nude Dancer." I will discuss "Jazzonia" later in this chapter.

<sup>169</sup> In the French version of the novel, "la danse de l'amour" starts on page 90. In the Seltzer translation, it begins on page 103.

thus claiming a western heritage. In *The New Negro*, although the final lines confirm the speaker's conversion, the poem emphasizes the weight of atavistic urges and, therefore, sustains a primitivist perspective on the portrayal of people of African descent.<sup>170</sup> Like many other texts in the anthology, Cullen's poetic contributions depict black Americans as essentially different from their white counterparts.<sup>171</sup>

Albert C. Barnes, in "Negro Art and America," proclaims the value of black art on the basis of this essentialist point of view: "it is a sound art because it comes from a primitive nature upon which a white man's education has never been harnessed" (19). In his opinion, the primitivism which informs the cultural production of African Americans does not result from an aesthetic choice; it is dictated by some inherent racial qualities that white artists could not emulate. The comparison which Barnes makes between two racial types is unequivocal:

The white man in the mass cannot compete with the Negro in spiritual endowment. Many centuries of civilization have attenuated his original gifts and have made his mind dominate his spirit . . . The requirements for practical efficiency in a world alien to his spirit have worn thin his religion and devitalized his art . . . The Negro has kept nearer to the ideal of man's harmony with nature and that, his blessing, has made him a vagrant in our arid, practical American life (20).

The only way to save modern American society from monotony lies in black art and primitivism. Barnes clearly sees black artists as the redeemers of the American nation. In his opinion, Western civilization desperately needs the revitalizing energy of its black members. Rogers echoes this point of view in the conclusion of his article: "jazz is rejuvenation, a recharging of the batteries of civilization with primitive new vigor" (224).<sup>172</sup> Primitivism, as

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<sup>170</sup> The version of the poem, published in *Color* in 1925, concludes on a more ambiguous note.

<sup>171</sup> It is not clear in *The New Negro*, and in the texts pertaining to the notion of race at the time, whether racial difference, often articulated as a set of irreducible oppositions, is constructed along biological or cultural line of thoughts. Biological essentialism and culturalism are often blended and it is sometimes difficult to make a distinction between these two ways of thinking – for a general discussion about 'essentialism,' see Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (1989); for an overview of the idea of 'race' as a scientific category during the interwar, see Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism* (1992).

<sup>172</sup> In "Rejuvenation Through Joy," published in *The Ways of White Folks* (1933), Langston Hughes derides this point of view. The story probably targets Mrs. Charlotte Mason, Hughes's former patron. It narrates the opening of a Colony of Joy, where rich people seek to attain felicity through the listening of jazz. The clients are principally ladies, "old residents of Park Avenue . . . who had already tried everything looking toward

seen by Barnes and Rogers, is the panacea that could revive modern society and redeem contemporary art.

In *Primitivist Modernist*, Lemke claims that “the ‘Negro’ whom Barnes celebrates as the epitome of the life-force is premodern and nonrational—the opposite of the modern and intellectual ‘New Negro’ that Locke envisioned” (120). This assertion has to be nuanced for, although Locke presents African Americans as perfectly adapted to modern society, he sometimes suggests a sort of essential primitivism as well. In “Negro Youth Speaks,” for example, he mentions “the race-gift of a vast spiritual endowment” (47) and emphasizes “an imagination that has never broken kinship with nature” (52). He also underlines the “remarkable carry-over of the rhythmic gift” in the first sentences of “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts” (254). In “The Negro Spirituals,” whereas he ascertains the intricacy of these musical pieces, he seems unable to avoid racial stereotypes: “what general opinion regards as simple and transparent about them is in technical ways, though instinctive, very intricate and complex, and what is taken as whimsical and child-like is in truth, though naïve, very profound” (200). Rhetorically conceding the instinctive and naïve nature of black music, he admits that the spirituals “are primitive, but their emotional artistry is perfect” (201). This set of paradoxical dualisms—instinctive/very intricate and complex, naïve/profound—attests to Locke’s desire to demonstrate the complex artfulness of black music and, simultaneously, his yielding to the dominant beliefs about people of African descent.

It is necessary to remember at this point that the essentialist representations, which Hughes and Cullen develop in their poems and which Barnes, Rogers, and Locke seem to take for granted in their respective essays, forms in *The New Negro* as a set of redeeming qualities.

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happiness—now they wanted to try Joy, especially since it involved so new and novel a course as Lesche proposed—including the gaiety of Harlem Negroes, of which most of them know nothing except through the rather remote chatter of the younger set who had probably been to the Cotton Club” (74).

Many white Americans—and black alike—considered, as Charles explains, that African Americans could offer an alternative to the ever-increasing mechanization of modern society:

Locke was fully aware that most whites . . . attributed the African American's putative primitiveness to residues of an African temperament, a tropical heritage that survived the dulling effects of civilization. Locke capitalized on these beliefs and offered African American cultural production—made more natural, 'free,' and poetic by its African leavening—as an exotic yet familiar tonic for modern America's spiritual malaise—the widespread sense of loss and alienation at the hand of a supposedly hyperrationalized, crass, and mechanistic society” (50).

In *The New Negro*, Locke consciously takes advantage of his readership's expectations. His staging of primitivist representations responds to a transient trend which harbors the hope that the black community could infuse American society with the regenerative lifeblood of its cultural authenticity.

Two of Hughes's poems presented in *The New Negro* sketch a connection between the present situation in America and the forgotten history of Africa. “Jazzonia” conjures two tableaux which are separated by chorus-like, slightly varied exclamations. The first stanza takes place in a Harlem cabaret and presents a girl dancing to the music of a jazz band. Wearing “a dress of silken gold,” she adopts a self-confident attitude, which is reflected in her eyes. In the second stanza, the speaker, musing on the first expository scene, evokes two feminine figures from the Bible and ancient history. Eve appears in the first place. The poet wonders if her eyes were “just a bit too bold.” He then asks himself how beautiful Cleopatra was when she was wearing “a gown of gold” (226). The proud eyes and the golden attire establish a connection between the dancer and these almost mythical figures. Jazz and the cabaret scene are linked to an African past by invisible threads and Cleopatra symbolizes this kinship. They are also related to the origin of humanity through the figure of the first woman, Eve, thus demonstrating the universal dimension of the depicted scene. Jazz and, by analogy, black culture are seen as the result and the more recent development of a long tradition that

unites the cabaret scene to the remote African continent and the figures that partook in its history.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” reinforces the idea of a direct relation between black American history and the legacy of Africa. The poem follows the memories of an archetypal Negro who narrates his relationships to the rivers that have witnessed his trajectory. The Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi are in turn evoked. The image of the river recalls the proximity of the black speaker to the forces of nature. It also suggests different stages of history. While the Euphrates suggests the birthplace of civilization, the Congo roots the speaker at the heart of the African continent.<sup>173</sup> The Nile evokes the greatness of the Egyptian dynasties whereas the Mississippi recalls the tragic days of slavery. Linking the speaker’s destiny to the fate of mankind, the poem situates the United States in the century-old development of culture and society. Evoking Abraham Lincoln, it interprets the end of slavery as the culmination of a long evolution. It also emphasizes the presence of the black race at every stage of human history, from the beginning of civilization to the present day. In “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes not only draws a parallel between Africa and the United States as he did in “Jazzonia,” he also sketches a civilizational trajectory which goes from the banks of the Euphrates to the United States. In these verses, Africa appears, to use Paul Gilroy’s words, in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), “as a mythic counterpart to modernity in the Americas” (113). The role of the African American community is to illuminate the legacy of Africa in the development of world culture.

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<sup>173</sup> In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, Hutchinson remarks that the allusion to the Euphrates situates the poem beyond race and Afro-centrism: “Readers rarely notice that if the soul of the Negro in this poem goes back to the Euphrates, it goes back to a pre-‘racial’ dawn and a geography far from Africa that is identified with neither blackness nor whiteness—a geography at the time of Hughes’s writing considered the cradle of all the world’s civilizations and possibly the location of the Garden of Eden” (415). Together with the reference to the Nile, it recalls the gesture towards Eve and Cleopatra which appears in “Jazzonia.”

### **Detour through the Ancestral Continent: the Classical Arts of Africa**

In “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” Locke claims as typically black American the characteristics that are usually attached to stereotypes of blackness, that is to say of African-ness: “what we have thought primitive in the American Negro—his naïveté, his sentimentalism, his exuberance and his improvising spontaneity are . . . neither characteristically African nor to be explained as an ancestral heritage. They are the result of his peculiar experience in America and the upheaval of its trials and ordeals” (254). The characteristics that white people immediately connect with Africa are in fact presented as resulting from the contact of people of African descent with American culture.<sup>174</sup> It is a response, conscious or unconscious, of African Americans to the experience of slavery and to the new environment in which they have been thrown. According to Locke, a return to the ancestral continent, not as a site of primitive fantasies, but as a place where a historical civilization once flourished, should be the foundation of black American art. Africa, when explored with an ethnographic gaze, displays a culture which vies with the traditions of the western hemisphere. Locke’s essay on African art constitutes a plea for the study of African sculpture. Taking the plastic arts as a starting point, he in fact intends to foster among the young generation an interest in African culture in general.

Such an investigation inevitably situates black artists within a century-old tradition: “There is in the mere knowledge of the skill and unique mastery of the arts of the ancestors the valuable and stimulating realization that the Negro is not a cultural foundling with his own heritage” (256).<sup>175</sup> A participation in the elaboration of artistic forms which pre-existed the

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<sup>174</sup> Seen in this light, these alleged African American qualities would be the result of a process akin to Glissant’s understanding of creolization.

<sup>175</sup> In “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” Schomburg reached the same conclusion in the final sentence of the essay: “Already the Negro sees himself against a reclaimed background, in a perspective that will give pride and self-respect ample scope, and make history yield for him the same values that the treasured past of any people affords” (237). Hutchinson remarks that this kind of affirmation articulates the New Negro movement as a ‘renaissance’ in the sense of Cornel West’s definition in *Keeping Faith* (1993): “a rebirth by means of recovering a classical heritage heretofore overlooked or ignored” (62). West, however, claims that “the Harlem Renaissance

American experience legitimizes the contribution of African American artists in the United States. It gives them a right to display a critical approach to American culture and justifies the exploration of uncharted paths in their artistic production. It liberates them from the constraints of imitation and allows for an unrestricted creativity. Locke sees African arts as a “mine of fresh *motifs*” (256). It can provide the material necessary to the creation of a new African American self-expressivity. Black artists should look for inspiration and technical innovation in the ancestral art of Africa so that a distinctive movement can emerge in the United States: “we ought and must have a school of Negro art, a local and racially representative tradition” (266). This statement seems to provide an answer to Du Bois’s dilemma of double-consciousness. It roots African American artistic production in a domestic context and, at the same time, connects it to a larger group drawn along racial lines. To turn to Africa for inspiration means, according to Locke, to learn “the lesson of a classical background, the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery” (256). It establishes African American artists as heir to a legacy of refined artistic techniques and inserts them in the long history of civilization.

To study African culture and history means to come to terms with the separation that slavery violently imposed on the black people of the United States.<sup>176</sup> The continuity that Hughes creates in his poems is a lyrical construction that has little if no impact on an approach of African culture as a subject of study. Locke readily admits the irreversible gap which separates African Americans from the ancestral arts: “the American Negro, even when he confronts the various forms of African art expression with a sense of its ethnic claims upon him, meets them in as alienated and misunderstanding an attitude as the average European

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was not so much a genuine renaissance, but rather a yearning for a renaissance aborted by its major artists” (62) – see Hutchinson, 424-25.

<sup>176</sup> Glissant keeps insisting on the importance of the rupture – see *Poétique de la Relation*, chap. 1; *Le Discours antillais*, chap. 6.

Westerner” (255). He thus admits the impossibility of the Glissantian return. Clearly identified as partakers in western civilization, African Americans have to circumvent the trauma of displacement and find a channel through which they can reach the land of origin. Educated at Harvard, Oxford and Berlin, Locke finds the solution to the problem in Europe: “there would be little hope of an influence of African art upon western African descendants if there were not at present a growing influence of African art upon European art in general” (255-56). It is through a European perspective that black artists can come to terms with their legacy. European contemporary art constitutes the key to the comprehension and appropriation of African culture. Locke easily justifies this pragmatic assertion: “There is a vital connection between this new artistic respect for African idiom and the natural ambition of Negro artists for a racial idiom in their art expression. To a certain extent contemporary art has pronounced in advance upon this objective of the younger Negro artists, musicians and writers” (262). To capitalize on aesthetic forms inspired by African art could ensure the success of African American artistic undertaking. The rediscovery of the African legacy supplemented by a European outlook increases the creative opportunities for the black artist.

It also implies the creation of a unique artistic language through a blending of different influences. In “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” Locke summarizes his vision of the African American artist: “If after absorbing the new content of American life and experience, and after assimilating new patterns of art, the original artistic endowment can be sufficiently augmented to express itself with equal power in more complex patterns and substance, then the Negro may well become what some have predicted, the artist of American life” (256-258). The ultimate objective of *The New Negro* is to place the African American artist at the center of American culture. The experience of displacement, the trauma of slavery, and the confrontation with a new culture have enriched his perception. Black Americans’ innate sensitivity should be supplemented by the careful study of contemporary art as seen in

European movements. It would enhance the African background on which they can develop their art and offer them the opportunity to be at the forefront of American artistic life. In *The New Negro*, Locke envisions a movement that could synthesize disparate cultural elements from Africa, America, and Europe, and merge them to create a unique black American voice.

Africa, in *The New Negro*, constitutes a detour, in Glissant's sense. It endows black Americans with a new sense of pride and self-respect, which helps them to be accepted into the American nation. It constitutes a source of inspiration and gives African American artists the possibility to partake in the elaboration of American culture. Even the type of primitivism displayed throughout the volume partakes in a positive vision of the African American community. The atavistic qualities of black people can help to revive a desiccated American society. The anthology clearly gives priority to the national scene over transnational circuits of solidarity. The New Negro movement is not however presented as a phenomenon limited to American boundaries; it also displays an international dimension which should not be ignored. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy remarks that "the proposed mission to elevate the black American racial self was inseparable from a second mission to elevate and enlighten the uncultured Africans by offering them the benefits of civilised life" (24). Locke emphasizes the important role of African Americans as the vanguard of the black race.<sup>177</sup> James Weldon Johnson, W. A. Domingo and Du Bois join their voices to his assertion and affirm the primordial part that black Americans have to play in the worldwide emancipation of the race.<sup>178</sup>

This is precisely what Maran saw in the anthology. In December 1927, Jane Nardal wrote to Locke in order to discuss the possibility to translate *The New Negro* into French: "Licenciée en langues classiques moi-même et ayant fait de sérieuses études d'anglais, je

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<sup>177</sup> See, Locke, "The New Negro," 14.

<sup>178</sup> See, Du Bois, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," 411-12; Johnson, "Harlem: the Culture Capital," 311; and Domingo, "Gift of the Black Tropics," 341 and 348.

serai heureuse de traduire ‘The New Negro,’ avec l’aide de ma soeur, diplômée d’Anglais. Qu’un livre écrit par des noirs américains soit traduit par des noirs français; ne serait-ce pas un signe évident de cet internationalisme noir en marche?”<sup>179</sup> After initially expressing his interest in the project, Locke explained, in an undated reply, that he had reservations about its feasibility: “I realize the book is too long and too disconnected for the French reading public, and as I told Monsieur Payot I would gladly rewrite the whole thing in a connected story of the new movement of the American Negro Renaissance.” In its original form, the anthology, conceived for an American readership, would not be comprehensible for a foreign public. However, Locke did not intend to give his anthology a more international flavor in prospect of a publication abroad. Except for Du Bois’s final essay, “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” the sections which he proposed to include in the translated version confirm the establishment of the African American community as an integral part of the American nation.<sup>180</sup> The ‘connected story,’ which *The New Negro* would tell if published in France, would still illustrate and advocate the adaptation of black Americans to American society. In spite of its focalization on the assimilation of the American black community to its surrounding society, *The New Negro* would constitute an important model for French black intellectuals. The journals published in Paris during the interwar period bear witness to this influence.

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<sup>179</sup> “Holding a license in classic languages and having done serious studies in English, I will be happy to translate ‘The New Negro,’ with the help of my sister who holds a degree in English. That a book written by American Negroes should be translated by French Negroes; wouldn’t it be an obvious sign of this ongoing black internationalism?”

<sup>180</sup> In the letter to Jane Nardal, Locke lists the sections which should not be removed from the original publication. Of his own articles, he leaves out “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”—in fact, he cuts the whole section entitled “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” Of the creative examples, he only keeps the Poetry part. In the second part of the anthology, he only deletes “The Negro and the American Tradition.”

### Chapter 3

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#### Reconfiguring the Geography of the Race: Parisian Black Periodicals from *Les Continents* to *La Revue du Monde Noir*

In 1932, in the last issue of *La Revue du monde noir*, Paulette Nardal's "Awakening of Race Consciousness" recapitulated and evaluated the distance covered by French black people during the previous decades. She summarily evoked, as starting point, the ideas of Marcus Garvey and the first Pan-African Congress organized in Paris in 1919 under the patronage of Du Bois: "Certain ideas are being launched. The theories of Marcus Garvey are commented upon. The first Pan-Negro Congress is organized" (28).<sup>181</sup> Nardal implicitly recognizes here the importance of the African American impact on the development of a race spirit among the French black community. The statement constitutes one of the first utterances of a narrative of influence that has since been reiterated in many scholarly works.<sup>182</sup> It acknowledges the Parisian black circles' attraction for the ideas of the New Negro movement. Such an affirmation does not come as a surprise in a periodical designed to appeal to a mixed audience comprised mainly of French and American black people. Nardal's account calls attention to a transatlantic connection between France and the United States which has been determinant in the self-awareness that the Antillean women at the center of her story developed while

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<sup>181</sup> *La Revue du monde noir* was a bilingual periodical—French and English. When quoting from articles that appeared in its pages, I will directly use the English text presented in the review unless I deem the presentation of both texts necessary – In 1971, Senghor would also present the idea that the evolution of the French black people is indebted to Du Bois in "Problématique de la Négritude" (11-12) – see also Reiland Rabaka, *The Négritude Movement* (2015).

<sup>182</sup> See, among many others, Kesteloot, *Les Ecrivains noirs de langues française* (1963) and *Histoire de la littérature négro-africaine* (2001); Irele, "Negritude or Black Cultural Nationalism"; Edward A. Jones, "Afro-French Writers of the 1930's" (1970) and *Voices of Négritude* (1973); Cook, "Some Literary Contacts"; Martin Steins, "Brown France vs. Black Africa: the Tide Turned in 1932" (1983); Chevrier, *La Littérature nègre* (1999); Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris*; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*; Ikonné, *Links and Bridges*. All these scholars emphasize, in different ways, the multiple connections between the black renaissance in the United States and the emergence of the Négritude movement.

studying in Paris.<sup>183</sup> To emphasize the black American contribution as the main external influence in the emergence of a ‘race consciousness’ constitutes a significant gesture. The ideas developed by the New Negro movement have found their way across the Atlantic and initiate a quest for identity which Nardal then locates in the French Parisian context of black intellectual circles.

This genealogy brings into focus recent achievements of the French black community. Nardal first presents Maran’s *Batouala* as a noteworthy moment of racial affirmation. She then lists three journals which, in her opinion, are representative of the evolution of the black intellectual activity in the capital: *Les Continents*, *La Dépêche africaine*, and *La Revue du monde noir*. The latter is unquestionably seen as the culmination of a collective effort to foster “a feeling of solidarity between the different groups of Negroes throughout the globe” (29). The French text of the article designates them as “les différents groupements noirs disséminés par le monde,” thus demonstrating an awareness of the diasporic dimension of the people of African descent (29).<sup>184</sup> However, although *La Revue du monde noir* displays a global interest in black culture, it privileges an understanding of the black world spatially defined between Africa, the Caribbean, and the black communities of France and the United States. The bilingual aspect of the journal—French and English—seems to encompass all these regions, including the Anglophone parts of Africa and the Caribbean. However, the content of the articles published in the periodical principally circumscribes it to a Franco-American paradigm. The black newspapers published in Paris during the 1920s and early 1930s bear

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<sup>183</sup> Edwards brilliantly sketches the question of gender in this narrative in the third chapter of *The Practice of Diaspora*: “It is often overlooked that [Nardal’s] evocation of an emergent black cultural internationalism is linked to an equally nascent feminism—a critical understanding of the particular positioning of upwardly mobile women of African descent in the metropole, and a consideration of the relations between Caribbean men and women in migration” (122) – see also Boittin, “In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations, and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris” (2005).

<sup>184</sup> “The different groups of Negroes disseminated around the world” – The French word ‘disséminé’ clearly imply compelled displacement.

witness to a growing interest among black French intellectuals for the African American community—its politics, its artistic production, and so on. Important changes in the topical content and the formal configuration of the journals under scrutiny in this chapter attest to the fascination of the French black community for what black people have achieved in the United States. This transformation of editorial practices explores different modes of communication which were aimed at meeting the demand of shifting audiences and attempted to coincide with the objectives of diverse political and cultural agendas.

The Parisian black community, which was at the time mostly comprised of the French Caribbean elite and African American visitors, forms the background of this discussion. It is important to bear in mind at this point that the presence of African Americans in Paris was constant during the interwar period. In *Paris Noir* (1996), Tyler Stovall states that “by 1924 the number of black Americans in Paris remained very small, probably no more than twenty-five or thirty individuals, virtually all musicians.” He continues by specifying that “this tiny group already had established the beginnings of a viable urban community, with its own institutions and its own neighborhood” (39). The many travels of Harlem Renaissance writers to the French capital, magnificently documented by Fabre in *From Harlem to Paris*, played an important role in the evolution of the black journals of the capital. However, the existence of an established community of African Americans provided a regular readership for these periodicals and probably fostered a curiosity for black American life. By the end of the 1920s, the black circles of the capital also welcomed a few African students—among whom Léopold Sédar Senghor and Ousmane Socé.<sup>185</sup> In her article entitled “In Black and White” (2005), Jennifer A. Boittin suggests that, at the same period, the Nardal sisters started to organize

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<sup>185</sup> For a description of the black populations in Paris, see Khalfa, “‘The Heart of the Black Race’: Parisian Negritudes in the 1920s” (2008).

their salon and, thus, to put into contact American and French black people (124).<sup>186</sup> The content of the periodicals under consideration in this chapter testifies that the relationships between the American and the French black communities increased, both in quantity and in quality, from the early 1930s onward. *La Revue du monde noir*, more than any other review, consecrates the connection between the two groups. In “Awakening of Race Consciousness,” Nardal self-consciously frames the journal as the prolonging of a dialogue which began in the columns of *Les Continents* a few years earlier.

This chapter explores the discussions which took place in the Parisian periodicals from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. Previous studies on the subject include Dewitte’s masterful work, *Les Mouvements nègres en France* (1985), and Christoph L. Miller’s “Involution and Revolution: African Paris in the 1920s,” which forms the first chapter of *Nationalists and Nomads* (1998). In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards also attends to the ‘periodical culture’ which flourished in the French capital at the time. However, none of these studies systematically document the increasing presence of African American themes and concerns in these journals. On the one hand, Dewitte and Miller concentrate on the French context and do not directly address the international components of the discussion.<sup>187</sup> On the other hand, Edwards’s description of the diaspora as a practice of translation and multilingualism reaches beyond the limits of periodical publications. It unwittingly fails therefore to underline the significance of the specific diasporic reconfiguration which takes place in the pages of these journals. This chapter attempts to amend these unintended misapprehensions and to

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<sup>186</sup> For a description of the Nardal sisters’ salon, see Achille’s preface to the edited version of *La Revue du monde noir*. In “In Memoriam: Paulette Nardal,” Achille mentions the creation of the salon around 1932 (292). See also Sharpley-Whiting, “Femme Négritude” (2000), 10 and *Négritude Women* (2002), 17; Jean Khalifa, 21; Edwards, 119-120.

<sup>187</sup> Miller mainly focuses on radical periodicals such as *La Voix des Nègres*, *La Race Nègre*, and *Le Cri des Nègres*, which are not included in Nardal’s narrative. They will therefore not be analyzed in this chapter. These journals focus less on black Americans’ cultural achievements than on white oppression in the United States. It is important to keep in mind that Nardal’s proposed genealogy is only one of many possible ways to tell the story of the Parisian black community’s development.

demonstrate that the attention paid by the French black community to African American matters underlies a profound reconsideration of the notion of ‘race’ and of the means towards its emancipation. It investigates successively the three journals that Nardal presented in “Awakening of Race Consciousness.” As the first black journal published in France, *Les Continents* can be seen as a precursor which inaugurated a dialogue with the African American community. Its concerns were not, however, centered only on this transatlantic connection. As we will see, the journal in fact can be presented as a globally sensitive periodical.<sup>188</sup> It featured news from all over the world and denounced oppression and injustice wherever it took place. *La Dépêche africaine* embodied a moment of transition from a colonial to a racial paradigm. Bearing witness to a more systematic organization of transatlantic contacts, the journal would progressively adapt its content to the developing needs of the nascent relations between American and French black intellectuals. *La Revue du monde noir* would finally consecrate these efforts. The existence of African American influences appears clearly in its pages, attesting to the reconfiguration of the speculative space through which racial uplift could be thought. Conceptions of the black race’s emancipation evolved from a struggle depicted through colonial lines to a pan-African project connecting the American and French black communities across the Atlantic.

In spite of the scarcity of direct intertextual references, the influence of Locke’s anthology, or more generally of the New Negro movement, can be felt more and more, as the decade unfolds, particularly in the ideas expressed in the black periodicals under consideration in this chapter. For inexplicable reasons, the efforts of Jane Nardal and René Maran to publish a translated version of *The New Negro* did not come to a successful

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<sup>188</sup> The expression ‘globally sensitive’ is borrowed from Martha Nussbaum’s “Toward a Globally Sensitive Patriotism” (2008). Although the term designate nation-states which pursue “the goal of global justice” (93), it could be broadened to any institution seeking to achieve the same results, that is to say, in the context of this chapter, to *Les Continents*.

conclusion.<sup>189</sup> However, the point of view that black people should adjust to the societies in which the vagaries of history have placed them and the idea that they should contribute to the cultural life of their country is constantly reasserted in the pages of the black journals published during the interwar in Paris. The necessity to rediscover and reassess the African origins and the cultural values of the black race also constitutes a belief which gains currency among French black intellectuals towards the end of the 1920s. It would be, of course, far-fetched to attribute the change only to the influence of the African American community, in general, and of Locke's anthology, in particular. However, the progressive orientation of the periodicals under scrutiny towards a Franco-American paradigm hints at the importance of black American thought in the development of the ideas displayed within their columns.

Retrospectively, this crucial evolution seems to narrate the genesis of Negritude. Miller deplores however the lack of consideration that scholars display toward "a decade that has usually been treated as an uninteresting prelude to the main event, Negritude" (10). Following this suggestion, the chapter considers the interventions that pervade the black periodicals under consideration as diverse contributions to a debate which continued in the 1930s and to which Césaire, Senghor, and Damas brought their own perspectives.<sup>190</sup> The starting point of reference, from which race could be thought, can be defined through Gary Wilder's notion of France as an 'imperial nation-state.'<sup>191</sup> All the Francophone writers under scrutiny in this thesis considered themselves French and participated in the intellectual life of 'Greater France.'<sup>192</sup> In the course of about a decade, however, Parisian black intellectuals modified their understanding of racial emancipation from a colonial to a pan-African

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<sup>189</sup> A translation of Locke's initial essay, by Louis and Renée Guilloux, would appear in June 1931 in *Europe*.

<sup>190</sup> See Chap. 5 of the thesis.

<sup>191</sup> We have already mentioned this concept in the chapter on *Batouala*. Wilder considers that France was understood at the time as a vast ensemble of territories where "colonies were reconceptualized as integral, if legally ambiguous, parts of the French nation" (4).

<sup>192</sup> Semley's article explores the laws and decrees which defined the process to become of French citizen.

paradigm as defined in the introduction to *African Diasporas in the Old and New Worlds* (2004) by Geneviève Fabre and Klaus Benesch: “a cultural network of interaction between Africa, North America, the Caribbean and Europe” (xvi).<sup>193</sup> The spatial reconfiguration of black thought in Paris during the 1920s and early 1930s inaugurates an intensified collaboration between the American and the French black intelligentsia.

### **Reconsidering *Les Continents*: a Globally Sensitive Journal**

On April 30, 1924, Kojo Tovalou-Houénou founded the “Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire.”<sup>194</sup> Two weeks later, the first number of *Les Continents*, a journal he edited in collaboration with René Maran, came out. It appeared fortnightly from May to December 1924 and was the starting point of a long series of black periodicals published in Paris. Tovalou-Houénou, who dubbed himself a prince from Dahomey, was born in 1887. The son of a wealthy merchant, he spent many years in Bordeaux where he was sent to school at the age of thirteen. The historian Patrick Manning points out that Tovalou-Houénou “achieved his citizenship after 13 years of education in France, during which he received degrees in law and medicine” (81). At the beginning of World War I, he volunteered to serve in the medical corps. During the summer of 1923, he was violently expelled from a café in Montmartre by some American tourists. The affair took on dramatic proportions and President Poincaré made a public declaration denouncing such racist behavior, thus reinforcing the image of France as a prejudice-free country.<sup>195</sup> It was this incident which brought Tovalou-Houénou in the limelight and led him to political activism. Probably referring to the articles published in *Les Continents*, Semley affirms that, by 1925, “Houénou was already emerging as a thorn in the

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<sup>193</sup> Gilroy similarly emphasizes “the interconnections between Africa, Europe, and the Americas” (121).

<sup>194</sup> “Universal League for the Defense of the Black Race” – Hereafter, LUDRN.

<sup>195</sup> According to Stokes, in “Race, Politics, and Censorship: G.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* in France, 1916-1923,” the incident was the starting point of a series of event which would result in the banning of Griffith’s racist movie from the French theaters (29).

side of the French colonial authorities because of a series of critical articles he had written in Paris about French colonialism” (268). The periodical defended the rights of black people and exposed the injustices taking place in the colonies. It rapidly became a platform for Tovalou-Houénou’s polemical declarations on French colonial policy.

On the front page of the journal, a section called “L’Esclavagisme Colonial” systematically denounces the injustices and violations of the colonial system.<sup>196</sup> In the very first issue of the periodical, Tovalou-Houénou virulently rails against the legislation embodied in the ‘Code de l’Indigénat.’ He compares it to an understated mode of enslavement, “moins tapageur aux yeux de l’étranger, qu’une armée trop représentative de l’esprit de conquête et d’asservissement.”<sup>197</sup> He exposes the exploitation and coercion that hides behind the jurisdictional illusion of iniquitous laws: “l’intervention de la force armée suscite des rébellions, tandis que la toute-puissance remise aux mains d’un administrateur obscur est une garantie de tout repos pour les sociétés exploitantes, pour les conseils d’administration d’icelles et pour leurs humbles représentants au Parlement et au Ministère.”<sup>198</sup> Colonialism is depicted as a commercial enterprise legally protected by corrupt politicians. In addition to legalized means of subjugation, Tovalou-Houénou discloses another strategy that aims at holding the colonized populations in a state of subjection: “L’enseignement—le non-enseignement—devrais-je dire, est l’autre moyen discret de se préparer des esclaves, mettons des boys, pour être moins précis.”<sup>199</sup> This statement not only exposes the lack of educational opportunities in the colonies, it also ironically stresses the euphemistic nature of colonial

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<sup>196</sup> See Tovalou-Houénou, “Au Pays de l’indigénat et de l’ignorance” and “Doctrines et doctrinaires de l’école coloniale.”

<sup>197</sup> “Less rowdy to the eyes of the foreigner, than an army too representative of the spirit of conquest and of enslavement” – *Les Continents* do not display any page number.

<sup>198</sup> “The intervention of military power stirs up rebellions, whereas omnipotence delivered into the hands of an obscure administrator is a warranty of rest for the operating companies, their management boards and their humble representatives in the Parliament and the Department.”

<sup>199</sup> “Education—non-education—should I say, is the other discreet way to prepare for oneself slaves, let’s say boys, to be less precise.”

discourse. Vague expressions—‘boys’ instead of ‘slaves’—conceal the true nature of colonial practices.<sup>200</sup> Language implements relations of domination, and the lack of knowledge of colonial subjects prevents them putting up resistance. Facing the coldly mercantile reality of colonialism, Tovalou-Houénou gives a watchword of revolt which will be taken over almost a decade later by a group of young West Indian students as the title of their review: “devant cette carence et cette hideuse exploitation, nous nous sentons en *légitime défense*. A défaut d’évolution nous aurons la révolution.”<sup>201</sup> This call to revolt, which appeared in *Les Continents* on 15 July 1924, should not, however, be interpreted as a claim for independence. It is rather an urgent demand for change. If the French government fails to measure up to the expectations of colonized people, they are likely to rebel against its authority. Tovalou-Houénou had already presented the ‘evolution/revolution’ dilemma in an address which he gave at the University of Paris and which was reproduced in the July 1924 issue of *Opportunity*: “It is thus that the Government who should aid in the evolution of the people—for evolution implies full liberty of movement, is driving the natives to an ignorant, unskillful and awkward intervention—that which, after all, is the first stage of evolution: revolution” (231). To many people in the colonies, revolution seemed to be the first step toward emancipation. It was to avoid such an outcome that *Les Continents* attempted to warn the French authorities.

In a column headed “Au Pied du Mur,” Maran warns the French government against the communist ideology which incites colonized people to revolt:

Le temps n’est plus loin où il faudra, inéluctablement, choisir entre nous, qui ne voulons que des jaunes et des noirs français, – ou rien. Car s’il continue à atermoyer ainsi, s’il continue à être impérialo-esclavagiste ou anti-libéral, la France, par sa faute, perdra toutes ses colonies . . . il lui faut choisir, et vite, entre nous, – qui n’exigeons

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<sup>200</sup> Claude McKay would also criticize the euphemistic nature of capitalist and colonial discourse – see chap. 4, 140-43.

<sup>201</sup> “In front of this shortcoming and this hideous exploitation, we feel in a state of *self-defense*. For lack of evolution we will have a revolution” (my italics).

que la justice due à nos protégés—et le régime anarchique, que le bolchévisme fait miroiter à leurs yeux sous le nom de liberté.<sup>202</sup>

Maran does not imply that he will personally take part in the rebellion. Advocating the assimilation of colonized populations, he considers the loss of the colonies as a failure. In an article published on May 15, 1924, he deplors the capitalist approach to colonization which has superseded what was once conceived as a noble endeavor: “Ainsi le plus bas matérialisme s’est-il introduit partout, et la France renie-t-elle ce qu’elle prétendait être sa mission, son histoire et son passé.”<sup>203</sup> Maran claims that colonial discourse about the ‘civilizing mission’ appears as a web of lies when confronted with the actual practices of colonial officials. French black people feel betrayed by a country which promised progress and only implements exploitation.

The civilizing role of France is not in itself questioned in the pages of *Les Continents*. What Maran and Tovalou-Houénou deplore in their articles is the fact that French officials seem to have abandoned the mission which befalls their country. The denunciation of French colonial policy in *Les Continents* does not cast doubt on the contributors’ unwavering attachment to France, which they consider as the motherland. In the first issue of the journal, Tovalou-Houénou draws a distinction between an idealized country and its representatives: “Nous pouvons demander aujourd’hui: qu’avez-vous fait à notre place? Ce n’est pas à la France encore une fois, que je pose cette question mais à ses représentants.”<sup>204</sup> Similarly, in the speech he gave at the University of Paris, he insists that, in spite of his accusation against colonial inequities, he remains faithful to the nation of which he is a citizen: “to begin with, I

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<sup>202</sup> “Time is not far when, unavoidably, a choice will have to be made between us, who only want French yellows and blacks, – or nothing. Because if it keeps procrastinating, if it continues to be imperialist and pro-slavery, or anti-liberal, France, through its fault, will lose all its colonies . . . it has to choose, and quickly, between us, – who only ask the justice due to our protégés—and the anarchical regime, that Bolshevism dangles under the guise of liberty.”

<sup>203</sup> “So the most debased materialism crept everywhere, and France denied its alleged mission, its history and its past.”

<sup>204</sup> “We can ask today: what have you done in our place? It is not to France, once again, that I ask this question, but to its representatives.”

must completely absolve France from the policies of some of her children. We who have been reared in the Motherland—we know her, we love her, and we have unshakeable confidence in her” (229). Educated in France, holder of a French passport, he does not doubt the integrity of the ‘imperial nation-state,’ to use Wilder’s terminology. For the contributors of *Les Continents*, the colonies belong to the ‘Greater France’ and, in the first issue, Maran already urges the recently elected government to take action and implement reform: “Plus de discours ; plus de formules imagées: des actes, et vite, si l’on veut renouer avec les grandes traditions de la France des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen, et travailler pour l’humanité.”<sup>205</sup> Echoing his call to his fellow French writers in the preface of *Batouala*, he speaks in the name of a country he loves and asks for a cessation of injustices which only dishonor the nation. It is in order to safeguard the humanist heritage of France that *Les Continents* focuses on colonial problems.

However, it would be erroneous to see the periodical as exclusively centered on colonial matters. In fact, the eclecticism of the subject demonstrates the wide interests of the journal. A page entitled “La Vie Universelle” presents worldwide coverage of topical events. Divided into continental subsections, it briefly narrates the noteworthy events that took place around the globe. In the first issue, for example, it relates the visit of an Ethiopian prince to France, comments on the emancipation struggle in the Philippines, briefly congratulates Blaise Diagne for his reelection as deputy from Senegal, reports on the potential opening of a university in the Gold Coast, and offers a short presentation of Gandhi, through a summary of the biography recently published by Romain Rolland.<sup>206</sup> The title of the periodical takes on its full meaning. The journal is in fact designed as an overview of world current affairs. Interestingly, a series of articles written in English expound the situation of black people in

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<sup>205</sup> “No more talk, no more metaphors: acts, and quickly, if we intend to revive the great French traditions of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and work for humanity.”

<sup>206</sup> Gold Coast is now known as Ghana.

the Anglo-Saxon world. Considered alongside an editorial protesting against the American occupation of Haiti and an account of the literature of French-speaking Switzerland, it could easily be seen as yet another instance of the diverse concerns of the journal.<sup>207</sup>

The choice of language clearly suggests that *Les Continents* has Anglophone people among its readership. In the double issue of 15 November-1 December 1924, the periodical displays a whole page headed “English Section” in capital letters. It features an advertisement for people wanting to learn French by correspondence and a small notice advising visitors to “write or call at n° 5, rue Paul Louis Courier” on their arrival in the French capital. These two announcements manifest an incipient awareness of the need for a more official organization of the international network that starts developing in Paris. The section is however mainly comprised of two articles: “Some facts about the British mandate on the Cameroon” by G. S. Best and “M. Diagne prosecutes ‘Les Continents’: Maranism Versus Diagnism” by N. S. Russel. The former consists in the final part of a report on British activities in Cameroon, whose first half had been published in the 15 October issue. The latter is a detailed explanation of the trial of René Maran and *Les Continents*, sued for libel by Blaise Diagne, deputy of Senegal. The article is explicitly intended for “the British and American readers of *Les Continents*.” Although it is difficult to know exactly who the persons that form this readership are, the papers of Alain Locke provide some hints as to its American members.<sup>208</sup> In a letter to his friend, dated from 1 September 1924, Maran confirms that he sent copies of *Les Continents* to Cullen, who had published a poem in the French periodical. He also appears to be delighted with the visit of “M. et Mme Warren Logan, le Docteur et Mme E. P. Roberts” and heartily thanks Locke for giving them the address of the journal. In another letter from October 18 of the same year, he also anticipates the sojourn of Jessie Fauset in Paris. Thanks

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<sup>207</sup> The editorial was published in the 15 June 1924 issue and the article about Swiss literature on 1 Sep. 1924.

<sup>208</sup> More research would be needed on the subject, especially in order to reveal the British readership of *Les Continents*.

to the indefatigable activity of Maran, the journal seems to become a meeting place for the French and American black communities. Its columns also promote ideas formulated in black America.

*Les Continents* provides through Tovalou-Houénou a platform for Garveyism in France. From the very first issue, the journal sporadically informs his readers about the Universal Negro Improvement Association and the ‘Back-to-Africa’ project.<sup>209</sup> The interest for the black American movement reaches its peak when the journal chronicles Tovalou-Houénou’s travel to the United States and his appearance at the UNIA Congress. The two September numbers feature a short report of his tour and, on 1 October 1924, in an article headed “Paris, Coeur de la Race Noire,” *Les Continents* presents excerpts of the discourse that its founder pronounced in New York.<sup>210</sup> Dewitte suggests that the contributors of the journal shared a political curiosity about Garveyism without thinking it would be appropriate in France (89). It is true that Tovalou-Houénou openly displayed an inquiring attitude towards the politics of the UNIA. However, his transatlantic connections were not approved unanimously among the editorial board of the journal. On August 15, 1924, Maran, as Secretary of the LUDRN, sent a letter to Du Bois to warn him against the president of the league, who seemed to be suspected of extortion. Maran did not however clearly state the nature of the problem. On 19 August, he wrote to Du Bois again to inform him that the Committee nevertheless maintained its confidence in him. On 6 October, Maran resigned from the LUDRN and sent another letter to Du Bois, in which he explained in more details his opposition to Tovalou-Houénou. His financial misconduct may have been one aspect of the problem, but it was the Garveyist positions of the president which mostly divided the two men: “Les discours démagogiques qu’il prononce là-bas m’indignent et indignent tous les

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<sup>209</sup> Henceforth, UNIA.

<sup>210</sup> The reports which appear in the September 1924 issues are titled “Notre Directeur en Amérique.”

nègres français qui ne croient pas qu'on improvise une question raciale.”<sup>211</sup> Neither Maran, nor *Les Continents* appeared to subscribe to the anti-colonialist rhetoric of Tovalou-Houénou. Significantly, when quoted in the journal, the discourse titled “Paris, Coeur de la Race Noire” only presented the passages which praise France as a space of liberty allowing for international connections between members of the black diaspora. Although the American movement got some publicity in the columns of the journal, the theories of Garvey were filtered before reaching a wider audience.<sup>212</sup>

The pages of *Les Continents* are considered by scholars as a catalyst in the relations between the New Negro movement and the black Parisian community.<sup>213</sup> On June 15, 1924, the journal published an open letter from Maran to Locke which established the collaboration between *Les Continents* and African American journals such as the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*.<sup>214</sup> Following this exchange of opinions, the French journal heralded the emergence of a black literature in the United States. Two poems by Langston Hughes, “The Negro” and “A Black Pierrot,” were published on 15 July 1924.<sup>215</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Hughes had written to Cullen to ask him to send some poems to be published in the French journal: “Send me two or three poems that you like real well. I think I can get them into *Les Continents*. And write me a little article about yourself to come along with them.”<sup>216</sup> Cullen’s “The Dance of Love (After

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<sup>211</sup> “The demagogic speeches he gives there offend me and offend all the Negroes in France who believe that a racial question cannot be improvised” – Maran presents himself as the spokesperson of the French black people and does not hesitate to speak in their names. He uses the term ‘nègre’ to show his solidarity with the black Antilleans as well as the Africans - see Fanon, “Antillais et Africains,” 263-64; and Geneste, “Autour de Batouala.”

<sup>212</sup> In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards affirms that “*Les Continents* directly shaped the discourse of the UNIA” through the articles reproduced in the *Negro World* (103). Although this consideration goes beyond the reach of this chapter, it reminds us of the important fact that influence between the French and the American black communities was never a unidirectional phenomenon.

<sup>213</sup> See Edwards, 104-115; Fabre, “René Maran, the New Negro, and Négritude,” 342-44, and *From Harlem to Paris*, chap. 5.

<sup>214</sup> In the September 1924 issue of *Opportunity*, the letter was translated and published with a reply from Locke – see Maran and Locke, “Open Letters” – see also, Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* 104-108, and Fabre, “Rene Maran, The New Negro and Négritude,” 342-43.

<sup>215</sup> According to Fabre, in *From Harlem to Paris*, Hughes met Maran in early July 1924 (70).

<sup>216</sup> Quoted in Fabre, “René Maran, the New Negro and Négritude,” 344.

Reading René Maran's *Batouala*)" appeared in the 1 September issue, preceded by a short article by Alain Locke about the young generation of African American writers. In "Maran, The New Negro and Negritude," Fabre remarks that this article allowed Locke to give shape to his ideas about the black renaissance in the United States: "thanks to Maran, six months before the celebrated 'New Negro' special issue of *The Survey Graphic* appeared, Alain Locke defined the movement's goals for the French-speaking public" (344). On October 1, 1924, Cullen's "Pagan Prayer" was also displayed in the pages of the journal. These insertions attest to the emergence of an international collaboration among black people and are an essential part of the contacts which connected the American and French black communities at the time. However, it is important, in order to understand the place of *Les Continents* in the genealogy of Parisian black periodicals, to keep in mind that they only constitute a small part of the journal's content.

To present the periodical only as a vehicle for a discussion between African American and French black intellectuals offers a partial view of *Les Continents*'s wide interests for racial struggles around the world. The black American periodicals with which the French journal corresponds are clearly defined through a racial perspective: Garvey's *Negro World*, Du Bois's *The Crisis: a Record of the Darker Races*, and Johnson's *Opportunity: a Journal of Negro Life*. Unlike these journals, *Les Continents* does not only present a racially inflected point of view. It is committed to creating and fostering an awareness of the worldwide awakening of the black race. It nevertheless goes beyond racial boundaries and denounces any type of cultural, or political, domination throughout the globe. The transatlantic connection which takes place in its column concerns but a small portion of the vast geographic area covered by *Les Continents*, which consciously positions itself in a worldwide space defined without race distinction through a dichotomy between colonizer and colonized, between oppressors and oppressed.

### ***La Dépêche Africaine: from a Colonial to a Diasporic Paradigm***

The specificity of *La Dépêche africaine*, founded in February 1928 by Maurice Satineau, president of the “Comité de Défense des Intérêts de la Race Noire,” lies in the peculiar bilingualism of its first-year issues. Recalling the attempts made by *Les Continents* a few years earlier to appeal to its British and American audience, each issue features a one-page section comprised of articles written in English. The subjects presented in this portion differ from the topics approached in the Francophone part of the periodical. The subtitle of each part tellingly demonstrates the twofold orientation of the journal. The English page displays a statement stressing the need for international racial unity: “united we stand, divided we fall,” whereas a motto pledging support to France in its colonial enterprise appears on the front page of the journal: “défendre nos colonies, c’est fortifier la France.”<sup>217</sup> Transnational and imperial views do not contradict each other in the pages of *La Dépêche africaine*. In his analysis of the journal, Dewitte remarks that “l’attachement à la présence française outre-mer n’empêche pas la naissance d’une identité et d’une solidarité nègre” (229).<sup>218</sup> The journal is conceived as a showcase for the black race. In the English section of the very first issue, in an article titled “Importance and Necessity of Existence of ‘La Dépêche Africaine,’” the desire to advertise the artistic and intellectual production of black people from every corner of the earth is clearly expressed: “it will show the world the production of writers, philosophers, and artists of our race” (8). The journal emphasizes the necessity to assert racial solidarity in the face of the white world, but does not preclude an assertion of difference between the groups

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<sup>217</sup> “To defend our colonies is to strengthen France.”

<sup>218</sup> “The attachment to the French overseas presence does not prevent the birth of a Negro identity and solidarity.”

of the diaspora.<sup>219</sup> While promoting a unique African personality and actively encouraging intellectual contacts between black people from different countries, especially France and the United States, the periodical stresses, through its bilingualism and, more importantly, through the different orientation of the articles in each language, a dissimilarity of interests between two linguistic groups. At the same time, it demonstrates a willingness to find a racial unity beyond this apparent diversity.

The section entitled “Notre But – Notre Programme” defines the general orientation of the journal. Its second part, partially paraphrased in the opening article of the English section, “Importance and Necessity of Existence of ‘La Dépêche Africaine’,” offers a reminder of the historical dispersal of the black race:

La Race Nègre compte environ 40 millions d’hommes que l’esclavage a disséminés sur tous les points du globe et dont l’évolution est loin d’avoir atteint partout le même niveau. Cependant si les circonstances malheureuses les ont dispersés, s’ils sont *séparés par la langue et par le degré de civilisation*, tous les noirs ne restent pas moins profondément unis par des pensées, des aspirations et des idées communes (1).<sup>220</sup>

The common experience of suffering and displacement of the people of African descent forms the link that connects black people from all around the world. The above statement adds the notion of a community unified by common thoughts and ambitions. The primary unity of the race has been broken through the historical trauma of slavery. The text mentions the disparity of the scattered black communities, which had to survive and to adapt themselves to the places where they had been compellingly displaced. The dissimilar evolutions they underwent

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<sup>219</sup> In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy stresses “the concept of diaspora and its logic of unity and differentiation” (120). This detail already hints at the change of paradigm which takes place in the pages of *La Dépêche africaine*.

<sup>220</sup> “The Negro race comprises more than 40 million individuals, who, through slavery, have been scattered all over the world and whose evolution is far from having reached the same degree. However, if unfortunate circumstances have dispersed them, if they are *separated by language and by their degree of civilization*, all the black people remain nonetheless profoundly united by common thoughts, aspirations and ideas” (my italics). I have decided to present my own translation here instead of using the version printed in the English section of the journal because of the poor quality of the later. It is however interesting to note that the English version makes no reference to a separation through language.

constitutes an explanation for the diverging interests they display. The reference to linguistic difference implicitly draws a distinction between the Francophone and Anglophone black communities. Working together toward a common purpose, they are nevertheless separated by a linguistic and cultural barrier. The reference to variable levels of civilization also hints at another important distinction at the center of the black world: the alleged backwardness of African populations. The manifesto printed on the first page of the journal unequivocally asserts that colonialism is necessary to guide less civilized peoples toward progress. It also explicitly rejects the idea of independence: “Certes les méthodes de colonisation des nations civilisées sont loin d’être parfaites; mais la colonisation en soi est *une œuvre humaine nécessaire*. C’est d’ailleurs l’épreuve par laquelle tous les peuples ont passé au cours de leur histoire et, dans l’état actuel des choses, l’autonomie des colonies ne peut ni hâter, ni faciliter l’évolution des races retardataires” (1).<sup>221</sup> Since they share a common origin and history, black people from France and the United States should encourage “the evolution of their backward brothers” (8). Such a project aims at consolidating the worldwide alliance of black people without challenging the existence of colonial empires.

One of the purposes of the journal, stated in the programmatic editorial which opens its first issue, is the unification of the black race throughout the world: “servir de trait d’union entre les Nègres d’Afrique et de Madagascar, des Antilles et d’Amérique, afin d’établir une correspondance universelle entre les hommes de couleur” (1).<sup>222</sup> The metaphor of the hyphen, which links as well as it separates, brilliantly illustrates the two orientations of the journal. In spite of the unifying purpose it serves, it necessarily emphasizes the difference of the

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<sup>221</sup> “It is true that the colonizing methods of the civilized nations are far from perfect; but colonization in itself is *a necessary human endeavor*. It is the struggle through which all the peoples have passed in the course of their history, and, at the present time, the autonomy of the colonies cannot hasten or facilitate the evolution of the backward races” (my italics).

<sup>222</sup> “To serve as a hyphen between the Negroes from Africa and Madagascar, from the Antilles and America, in order to create a universal correspondence between men of color.”

diasporic communities it attempts to put in contact. In the introduction to *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds*, Fabre and Benesch remark that the pan-African movement “created a new awareness of the differences among the various African diasporas” (xvi). The bilingual dimension of the journal underlines the dissimilarity of interests which characterizes each community without preventing their coming together. The statement also emphasizes another aspect of the conception of the black race which appears in *La Dépêche africaine*. For the first time, the black world appears to be limited to the African, Caribbean and American spaces. Although Europe seems to be excluded from this geography, it is indirectly present through the mention of the Caribbean, Madagascar and Africa. The journal indeed certainly refers to the Francophone parts of these areas and implicitly encompasses the French Africans and Antilleans living in the metropole—including the contributors to the journal in which the article is published. Although still focused on the discourse of the ‘Greater France,’ this modification profoundly modifies the geographical conceptualization of the race. As we have seen, *Les Continents* displayed interests spanning the entire globe. Nations such as India or the Philippines participated in the struggle against the injustices of colonization. In *La Dépêche africaine*, the focus moves from a dichotomy drawn along colonial lines, between colonizers and colonized, to a system delineated by the triangular trade and the African history of enslavement. The notion of black internationalism seems to be confined to the French and American black elites who recognize their connection to Africa and decide to help its populations on their way to civilization.

The English section of the journal especially embodied the desire to connect black people across the Atlantic. It significantly undertakes the promotion of African art, for example, by displaying articles by Paul Guillaume or transcribing a radio address by Albert C.

Barnes.<sup>223</sup> An article by John A. Gray, headed “The Negro and the Fine Arts,” also assesses the African American contribution to American culture. In terms echoing Locke’s anthology, it concludes on a positive note foretelling further artistic achievements: “The new Negro is progressive, serious, ambitious. He is ready and willing to grasp at new ideas. He is not afraid to try a new way of doing things. A love for the fine arts is inherent in the Negro. It needs development. If today his first efforts have attracted favorable attention who can say what future development will produce” (8).<sup>224</sup> African Americans are presented as models which should inspire black artists in France. Even after the disappearance of the English section, by the end of the first year of publication, the promotion of black American culture continued to occupy a significant space in the journal, particularly through the articles of Paulette Nardal and René Maran.<sup>225</sup>

The most interesting aspect of the English section in *La Dépêche africaine* lies in its occasional, and certainly incomplete, census of African Americans in Paris. It signals the arrival of black American visitors in the city and, from time to time, greets a departing friend whose integration in the Parisian black circles was favored by a prolonged stay in the capital. In July 1928, for example, it addresses a warm welcome to Countee Cullen. The following month, a brief text announces that “Dr. Alaine [sic] Locke, author of ‘The New Negro’ is paying his yearly visit to France” (8). In September, a short list entitled “Colored Americans in Paris” enumerates the visit of other African Americans in the capital. A short article advertises the arrival of Dr. C.-C. Adeniyi Jones from Sierra Leone and of Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams, editor of the *Chicago Defender*. The journal informs its readers of virtually all the

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<sup>223</sup> “Negro Art and the Spirit of the Epoch” and “Prestige of African Art” by Paul Guillaume, and “Primitive Negro Sculpture and its Influence on Modern Art” by Albert C. Barnes. The first article by Paul Guillaume was also published in French on the front page of the journal.

<sup>224</sup> See, for comparison, the two opening essays of *The New Negro*: Locke’s “The New Negro” and Barnes’s “Negro Art and America.”

<sup>225</sup> “Musique nègre: Antilles et Aframérique” and “Une Femme Sculpteur Noire” by Paulette Nardal, and “L’Europe et la Civilisation Américaine: le Nègre aux Etats-Unis” by René Maran.

prominent intellectual black figures that pass through the city. This practice attests to the progressive organization of a community which keeps expanding its affinities across boundaries. Although the journal announces the arrival of an intellectual from Sierra Leone, attesting to the West African connections which also begin to emerge at the time, it mainly displays notifications about African American intellectuals. A few years before the Nardal sisters and René Maran open their weekly salon in Paris, *La Dépêche africaine* allows American and French black intellectuals to meet and to exchange ideas about their shared racial characteristics.

In “L’Internationalisme noir,” which appears on the fifth page of the first issue, Jane Nardal reflects on this novel situation. She acknowledges the racial unification which takes place around the world: “Des noirs, de toutes origines, de nationalités, de mœurs, de religions différentes sentent vaguement qu’ils appartiennent malgré tout à une seule et même race ” (5).<sup>226</sup> However, the community she is talking about is in practice restricted to the Parisian black circles and their occasional African American visitors. The terminology she puts forward in order to describe the phenomenon confirms this demarcation: “A idées nouvelles, mots nouveaux, d’où la création significative des vocables : Afro-Américains, Afro-Latins. Ils contiennent notre thèse tout en jetant une lueur nouvelle sur la nature de cet internationalisme noir” (5).<sup>227</sup> The thesis in question is that, following the example of the African Americans, black people from France should reaffirm their connection to Africa without losing their French specificity. The metaphor of the hyphen finds in these lines another application. It is, according to Sharpley-Whiting, in “Femme Négritude,” “an embracing of cultural *métissage*,

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<sup>226</sup> “Blacks of all origins, of different nationalities, mores, and religions vaguely feel that in spite of everything they belong to one and the same race” (105) – I use the translation of Sharpley-Whiting and Georges Van Den Abbeele as it is presented in Sharpley-Whiting’s *Négritude Women*.

<sup>227</sup> “For these new ideas, new words, whence the creative significance of the terms: Afro-American, Afro-Latin. They confirm our thesis while casting new meaning on the nature of this Black Internationalism” (106).

of *double-appartenance*” which recalls DuBois’s double-consciousness (14).<sup>228</sup> However, the dual identity described by Jane Nardal does not correspond to the painful striving formulated in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In “L’Internationalisme noir,” it sounds like a fashionable affirmation of African origins: “Dorénavant, il y aurait quelque intérêt, quelque originalité, à se retourner vers l’Afrique, berceau des nègres, à se souvenir d’une commune origine” (5).<sup>229</sup> In spite of her nonchalant tone, the acceptance and assertion of an African heritage for a French West Indian woman like Jane Nardal, educated in France and assimilated into French culture, constituted a crucial evolution.

The fact that the journal insists in its title on the notion of ‘africanity’ is not without significance. Whereas other black newspapers at the time used the word ‘nègre’ to emphasize certain racial commonalities, *La Dépêche africaine* posits the ancestral continent as the unifying link that connects black people all over the world.<sup>230</sup> Throughout its pages, in a language which recalls *The New Negro*’s ‘strategies of attraction,’ the contributors define a black identity fundamentally different from, but not incompatible with, western characterization.<sup>231</sup> In May 1928, in “Le Nègre et l’Art Dramatique,” Paulette Nardal describes the performance of Habib Benglia, an Algerian actor, in *The Emperor Jones*. Underscoring his spontaneity and sensuality, she uses a metaphor of animality to illustrate his close proximity to nature: “Ses sauts d’humeur, ses volte-face psychologiques surprennent comme les mouvements inattendus d’un jeune animal d’une sensualité très saine, d’un être encore tout proche de la nature” (4).<sup>232</sup> Such a statement reveals two discursive tendencies.

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<sup>228</sup> In “Resisting the Primitive,” Sweeney speaks of “the notion of both racial and cultural *métissage* that stood in direct opposition to the empirical positivism of racial science” (52).

<sup>229</sup> “Henceforth there would be some interest, some originality, some pride in being Negro, into turning back toward Africa, in remembering a common origin” (106).

<sup>230</sup> See, for example, *La Voix des Nègres*, *La Race Nègre* and *Le Cri des Nègres*.

<sup>231</sup> The idea of ‘strategies of attraction’ is borrowed from Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (29). It consists in meeting the white public’s expectations in order to draw attention to the text which then subverts the stereotypes from which it stems.

<sup>232</sup> “His sudden mood swings, his psychological volte-face surprise as the unpredictable moves of a young animal with a healthy sensuality, a being still close to nature.”

On the one hand, it reflects the paternalistic language which limits African people to the role of good savages—the idea of French and American black people helping in their advancement pertains to this type of discourse. On the other hand, it constitutes an attempt at a positive essentialization of the black subjects. Like in some primitivist texts of *The New Negro*, their sensuousness and their intimacy with the natural forces are not seen as a proof of backwardness but rather as positive assets. Emphasizing their artistic endowment, black people are presented as resisting the ever-increasing mechanization of society. They incarnate a hope of redemption for a world lost in industrial and technological progress. Paulette Nardal stresses the innate nature of these qualities: “Certes, Benglia a appris son métier, mais il est, comme tout homme de sa race, poète de naissance” (4).<sup>233</sup> This poetic gift characterizes people of African descent wherever the vagaries of history displaced them. *La Dépêche africaine* embodies at the same time the birth of a transnational racial consciousness and the emergence, in France, of an essentialist vision of the black race. Dewitte appropriately summarizes the importance of this change:

L’essentiel réside dans ce sentiment nouveau, à peine concevable dix ans auparavant: des Nègres séparés par plusieurs siècles de déportation et d’esclavage prennent conscience que leur sensibilité et leurs valeurs communes perdurent malgré l’éloignement géographique, culturel, temporel. L’affirmation de ‘l’âme nègre’ n’est finalement plus si loin (231).<sup>234</sup>

*La Dépêche africaine* reorganizes the geography of race through a representation of the black world centered on the idea of an essential African personality. It also shifts the global concern displayed in *Les Continents* to a pan-African vision, thus reinforcing a transatlantic collaboration between the American and French black communities. *La Revue du monde noir*

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<sup>233</sup> “Of course, Benglia has learned his job, but he is, as every man of his race, a born poet.”

<sup>234</sup> “The essential lies in this new feeling, almost unconceivable ten years earlier: Negroes separated by several centuries of deportation and enslavement become conscious that their sensibility and their common values remain in spite of geographical, cultural and temporal distance. The affirmation of the ‘black soul’ is not finally so far.”

further develops the definition of the ‘black soul’ and consecrates the ‘awakening of race consciousness.’

### ***La Revue du Monde Noir: Consecration of the Franco-American Connection***

With six issues published between November 1931 and April 1932, *La Revue du monde noir* intends to give priority to cultural matters. The opening article emphatically states the triple goal of the review. First, it aims to provide a platform for intellectual reflection: “to give the intelligentsia of the black race and their partisans an official organ in which to publish their artistic, literary and scientific works” (1). Looking at the content of the journal, it becomes clear that the intended meaning of the word ‘scientific’ mainly encompasses historical and socio-political studies of the black world.<sup>235</sup> The artistic dimension of the periodical would concentrate on the publication of black contemporary authors. The project is undoubtedly elitist and aspires to encourage active thinking in its columns. The second point exposed in the statement of purpose defines the subject matter that the contributors should explore: “To study and to popularize, by means of the press, books, lectures, courses, all which concern Negro civilization and the natural riches of Africa, thrice sacred to the black race” (1). The recent ethnographic works of Maurice Delafosse and of Jean Price-Mars have shown evidence of an original African civilization.<sup>236</sup> The ancestral continent remains at the center of attention. The recognition of its historical significance constitutes an additional step toward the acceptance of its cultural values. The third aim of *La Revue du monde noir* is the unification of the black race: “to create among the Negroes of the entire world, regardless of nationality, an intellectual and moral tie” (1). The study of the African past should bring

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<sup>235</sup> The third issue published a scientific studies written by A. Marie and G. Zaborowski and titled “Cannibalism and Lack of Vitamins.”

<sup>236</sup> Maurice Delafosse, *Les Noirs de l’Afrique* (1922), *L’Âme Nègre* (1922), and *Les Civilisations disparues* (1925); Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle* (1928) – for an account on the influence of Price-Mars on Négritude, see, Tessonneau, “Price-Mars ‘Parrain de la Négritude’” (2009).

together the different black populations of the world. The journal nonetheless confirms and strengthens the privileged relation between the French and American black communities.

Describing its commitment to offer a platform for both groups, Edwards insists that, “more than any other interwar periodical, *La Revue du monde noir* systematically strove to practice black internationalism as *bilingualism*, running English and French in parallel columns throughout every issue” (120).<sup>237</sup> The journal offers a wide range of literary texts from French Caribbean and African American writers.<sup>238</sup> Poems and extracts from Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Walter White, and John Matheus stand alongside texts by Etienne Léro, René Maran, Gilbert Gratiant, and Roberte Horth, among others. The colonial administrator Félix Eboué’s transcription of an African tale supplements a contribution by Cugo Lewis, excerpted from *The New Negro*.<sup>239</sup> Jane Nardal, using the nom de plume of Yadhé, contributes a poetic evocation of Guadeloupe entitled “Night Falls on Karukera Island.”<sup>240</sup> The proliferation of literary texts published in the review attests to a desire to generate among authors of African descent an awareness of the works produced on both sides of the Atlantic. A letter sent by Jane Nardal to Locke on 6 October 1931 illustrates the ambition to frame the journal as a forum to discuss the literary creations of French and American black writers: “in the second number of The Review of the Black World which we are preparing now, you will find a very delicate short-story [sic] by one of my friends, Mr.

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<sup>237</sup> Italics in the original.

<sup>238</sup> It is interesting to note however that the first issue of the periodical features exclusively African American authors. McKay’s poem, “To America,” and John Matheus’s “Fog” are thus presented to the French public. The sonnet had been published in *Harlem Shadows*, in the *Liberator*, and in Alain Locke’s *Four Negro Poets*. It seems that copies of Locke’s work circulated in Paris at the time. The possibility that the poem was asked directly to McKay cannot be excluded either since he still lived in France. Matheus’s short-story had appeared in *The New Negro*.

<sup>239</sup> In *The New Negro*, this text, “collected by Mr. Fauset in the South, August, 1925” (245), was presented together with “B’rer Rabbit fools Buzzard” (248-49) in order to emphasize the connection between the American Southern folklore and African traditions. In *La Revue du monde noir*, it stands next to Nardal’s Caribbean evocation.

<sup>240</sup> It is Sharpley-Whiting who identifies Jane Nardal as Yadhé in the epigraph of the second chapter of *Negritude Women* (38).

Léro . . . I would like to have your opinion on the possibility of the American Negro writers of becoming interested in such a form of literature.” We can speculate on her intentions when she makes such a demand. Is she trying to know more about the taste of the American public in order to prepare the ground for publications after the repeated attempts of Maran, since *Batouala*, to have something published in the United States? Does she want to propose models for young black American writers? In any case, her queries demonstrate her willingness to form a transatlantic community of culture connected by similar literary preferences and artistic aspirations.

In addition to the presentation of the literary achievements of black writers, the review features general articles on black culture around the world. “Les Disques de musique nègre” by Gisèle Dubouillé, for example, partakes in this effort to publicize black culture. In the second number of the review, in December 1931, Andrée Nardal publishes a study titled “Notes on the Biguine Créole” (51-53). She describes its principal characteristics and deplores at the same time the fact that it is “presented to Parisians only under an obscene [sic] interpretation” (51). The article’s purpose is precisely to correct the misapprehensions which surround the reception of this Antillean traditional dance. *La Revue du monde noir* not only aims at promoting black culture, it intends to correct erroneous beliefs and stereotypical interpretations. In this prospect, Pierre Baye-Salzmans’s “An Opinion on Negro Art” and “Negro Art, its Inspiration and Contribution to Occident” reply to the idea, uttered by the art critic Camille Mauclair, that “il n’y a jamais eu d’art nègre” (48).<sup>241</sup> Articles such as Eboué’s “The Banda, their Music and Language,” Léo Frobenius’s “Spiritism in Central Africa,” and J. Grall’s “The Tom-tom Language of the Africans” prolong the reflection on African cultures

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<sup>241</sup> “There was never any Negro art” – the English text presented in the review does not quote the citation, but paraphrases it: “M. Camille Mauclair . . . had denied the existence of Negro art” (48).

that pervades the journal, and contribute to propose a positive image of black artistic production.

An often overlooked aspect of *La Revue du monde noir* is its attention, though minimal, to visual arts. The only full-page representation displayed in its pages is “Forge Foundry,” by Aaron Douglas, who was studying in Paris between 1931 and 1932. In a style which prefigures his *Aspects of Negro Life*, painted in 1934, it features three men, rendered as shadows, toiling in front of a huge rectangular window which provides the necessary light to distinguish them through the smoke veil caused by the foundry’s furnace. Although, in “The Aaron Douglas Effect” (2007), Richard J. Powell identifies the hazy silhouettes as “recognizably African American men,” Douglas does not provide any geographical information which would allow the readers to locate the scene he depicts (68). It even seems that its publication in a black Parisian periodical enlarges its possible meaning. On the one hand, it generalizes the presence of black worker in the industrial sector—in the United States as well as in France and elsewhere. On the other hand, it may even go beyond a strictly racial significance. It has to be noted that only the shadow carrying a heavy load in the middle ground presents distinct racial features. The inclusion of Douglas’s representation at the midpoint of Jean Finot’s article, entitled “Race Equality,” seems to orient its interpretation towards a call for interracial solidarity. Whatever the intended meaning of the picture, the fact that the work of an African American artist is chosen in the very first issue of the journal to exemplify black pictorial creations adds an often neglected element to the presence of black America in its columns. The a-posteriori knowledge that it also constitutes the single example reproduced in *La Revue du monde noir* even reinforces its importance.

The attention to visual arts is also demonstrated by the decorative vignettes which punctuate the periodical. Although most of them are of unknown origin and do not present a real interest, two sketches connect the journal to the New Negro movement. Appearing

recurrently from the third number onward, they represent an African mask and the stylized head of a zebra—perhaps another mask.<sup>242</sup> Their origin establishes yet another link between the American and the French black communities. The illustrations are indeed taken from to Winold Reiss's set of decorations interspersed in Locke's *New Negro* anthology.<sup>243</sup> Although in *La Revue du monde noir*—as in *The New Negro*—these motifs only serve an ornamental purpose, such a borrowing illustrates the importance given in the black Parisian circles to African American views on the way of framing and articulating a black renaissance. The editorial board—mainly comprised of Antillean intellectuals—feels the need to turn to an African American model in order to give the review an African character—at least visually. It constitutes once more an implicit reminder of what the black race has already achieved in the United States.

All these examples of successful accomplishments by men and women of African descent are meant to foster a feeling of racial pride among the black readers of *La Revue du monde noir*. Paulette Nardal concludes her article on Grace Walker by a significant quotation about the acclaim she received for the recital she gave in Geneva: “I have never received such an ovation and probably never shall again. I feel however that it was given to my people everywhere, not to me” (37). The French translation states that the popular success was directed at “ma race entière” (37).<sup>244</sup> The cultural production of people of African descent commands respect and *La Revue du monde noir* participates in the worldwide recognition of black people's cultural achievements which justify the suppression of inequalities between the races. Since black people are able to create esthetically praiseworthy works of art, they do not

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<sup>242</sup> The mask appears in the last four issues respectively on page 36, 39, 58, and 24. The zebra head, which is also displayed in the four last numbers of the journal, can be seen respectively on page 4, 15, 32, and 59.

<sup>243</sup> They both appear six times in the anthology (mask: 16, 53, 104, 150, 195, and 360—zebra head: 25, 74, 111, 215, 298, and 340).

<sup>244</sup> “My entire race” – this remark recalls Chesnutt's reaction to the attribution of the Goncourt Prize in 1921. See chap. 1, 37-38.

deserve to be contemptuously rejected and should be considered as equals, not only on the intellectual and artistic level, but also in their socio-political aspirations.

The promotion of black culture also permits to continue clarifying the definition of an African personality that started to take place in *La Dépêche africaine*. In “The Negroes and Art,” Louise Thomas Achille presents the characteristics of the black race. The defining element which unites all people of African descent is an innate artistic capacity. The black race is depicted as “a congenitally artistic race” (55). Achille manifestly situates this endowment in the biological constitution of black people:

Negroes are essentially artists . . . In no other human race, indeed, is the aesthetic sense so general a gift and does it so often interrupt the activity of each individual. This is because, in the whole race, in its purest elements as well as in such half-breeds as have kept the distinctive racial features, there occurs what never happens in other races, except in very few privileged persons. In the Negro race, there is not, properly speaking, an aesthetic *sense* the operation of which requires a large participation of the *intellect* (representation of designs, colours, sculptural or literary forms, precepts, rules and so on). It is rather an artistic *instinct* which frequently claims instantaneous satisfaction for the whole being, *body* and soul. It reaches down to the thinnest nerves and the remotest tissues of the body and shakes the whole of it with real physical cravings (53-54).<sup>245</sup>

The instinctive reaction described in these lines pertains to a physical disposition. The Senghorian opposition between reason and emotion is already present and draws a clear distinction between black people and other races. The most important aspect of this description lies in its essentialism. In this article, Achille claims a black specificity based on biological difference. Although this statement recalls in many ways the primitivism displayed in *The New Negro* that we have analyzed in chapter 2, it stresses more than anywhere else a physiological need for arts, and unequivocally roots the difference of the black race in biological constitution.<sup>246</sup> In “A Negro Woman Speaks at Cambridge and Geneva,” without relying on pseudo-scientific facts, Paulette Nardal similarly describes the black subject in

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<sup>245</sup> Italics in the original.

<sup>246</sup> Such a statement has to be understood as a statement of differentiation, not of hierarchization. Barnes’s essay in Locke’s anthology insistently connects black art to inherent qualities pertaining to biology.

front of the western world: “The Negro, in an environment tyrannized by machinery and standardization, has preserved his capacity for profound emotion, his sense of fantasy and his vital spontaneity” (37).<sup>247</sup> These two examples illustrate the fact that, whether attributed to biological traits or to historical and social conditions, an idea of black identity has emerged which seems to unify the black world.

In “Awakening of Race Consciousness,” Paulette Nardal summarizes the evolution of black people from a state of thoughtlessness to the conscious construction of a new identity. In the very first sentences of the article, she explains that she wants to focus on Caribbean black people and takes the measure of the change that has occurred recently: “A few years ago, we might even say a few months ago, certain questions were simply tabooed in Martinica. Woe to those who dared to approach them! One could not speak about slavery or, proclaim his pride of being of African descent without being considered as an over-excited or at least as an odd person” (25). This statement constitutes an intertextual reference to the article published in *La Dépêche africaine* in February 1928 in which Jane Nardal boasted about the originality of reclaiming an African origin. The situation has evolved quickly and racial pride is no longer the fashionable attitude it was a few years earlier. It defines an identity based on two principal components: an awareness of the history of black people’s suffering and a proud assertion of African ancestry. Foreshadowing Glissant’s theories, Paulette Nardal divides into three phases the process which leads to the affirmation of this black personality. The first step consists in a servile imitation of the culture to which the black subject has been brought: “a period of absorption of the white elements by the Negroes” (26).<sup>248</sup> The second stage is characterized by protest and revolt which lead to a final phase that

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<sup>247</sup> This statement echoes McKay’s *Banjo* when, at the end of the novel, the two main protagonists, Ray and Banjo, flee “the ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life” (324).

<sup>248</sup> The French text is confusing. Nardal speaks about “une période d’absorption de l’élément noir par l’élément blanc” (26). It can be interpreted as the disappearance of the African qualities apparently replaced by the white culture through a process of assimilation. It would then echo Ray’s fears in *Banjo* (163-164).

Nardal designates as “the accession . . . to real culture” (27). According to Nardal, the black American community constitutes a convincing illustration of this evolution.

During slavery, African Americans underwent a phase of imitation of American white culture. Although certain slave narratives retain “their original freshness and genuine emotion because they were written in dialect,” the period is characterized by an initiation to the language and the culture of the new environment to which black people have been displaced (26). Nardal identifies the second phase with the quest for liberty: “The anti-slavery struggle saw the outburst of a literature of controversy and moral protest” (26). It is only in the early twentieth century that they found a poetic voice of their own in order to contribute to the dominant culture: “The modern writers, without discarding the racial themes and the emotional intensity due to their ancestral experiences, took them as the starting point of their inspiration and gave them a universal purport. It is important to note that they abandoned [sic] the Negro dialect in favour of the forms and symbols of traditional literature” (27). Starting from black experience, the purpose is to partake in the culture of the adopted country. Nardal quotes Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926) in order to put into perspective her discourse: “the young Negro writers, rejecting all inferiority complex, ‘intend to express their individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame’” (27).<sup>249</sup> African Americans incarnate the success that awaits black French writers if they manage, as the black people in the United States did, to recover the African voice that could still be heard in certain slave narratives. This ‘awakening of race consciousness’ is the only way to achieve the emancipation of the populations originating from Africa.

However, Paulette Nardal does not advocate an utter rejection of western civilization: “We are fully aware of our debt to the Latin culture and we have no intention of discarding it

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<sup>249</sup> The page number is from *La Revue du monde noir*. The statement appears on page 694 in Hughes’s article – Nardal proposes McKay and Hughes as models to emulate, based on the poems that were published in the first and third issue of the journal.

in order to promote I know not what return to ignorance. Without it, we would have never become conscious of our real selves” (31). In terms recalling the words her sister, Jane, in *La Dépêche africaine* in February 1928, she puts forward a sort of ‘métissage’ which combines French culture with African heritage: “we want to go beyond [western] culture, in order to give to our brethren, with the help of the white scientists and friends of the Negroes, the pride of being the members of a race which is perhaps the oldest in the world” (27). Western culture has allowed a rehabilitation of the black race and has thus enabled people of African descent to participate in a culture which is now defined as universal. In the first number of the review, this aim had been explicitly stated: “the two hundred million individuals which constitute the Negro race, even though scattered among the various nations, will form over and above the latter a great Brotherhood, the forerunner of universal Democracy” (1). The affirmation of the ‘black soul’ and the dream of a universal humanism devoid of racism form the background of the Negritude movement. Already formulated in *La Revue du monde noir*, it will be further theorized by Senghor, Damas and Césaire during the late 1930s.

The evolution of the black periodicals under consideration shows evidence of an African American influence. At the same time, it demonstrates a willingness to adapt the means of communication to the specific dialogue that develops in this intellectual space. *Les Continents* bears witness to the first contacts between the American and French black communities. The exchanges which take place in its pages do not go beyond an informative intent. They are only a glimpse of a general struggle against injustice. *La Dépêche africaine*, far from questioning the colonial frame of reference, subtly moves away from it and heads toward a diasporic understanding of racial emancipation. Colonial preoccupations stay preeminent in the French part of the journal, whereas the English section demonstrates an increasing willingness to bring the discussion across national, or imperial, boundaries. The African continent becomes the defining space where black identity is constructed. The journal

also signals a desire to organize the Parisian black community and to offer a welcoming structure for black Americans travelling to Paris. The content of the *La Dépêche africaine* reflects the intensification of contacts between black people from France and the United States. This Franco-American paradigm reaches its climax in the columns of *La Revue du monde noir*. Bilingualism characterizes the review throughout its six issues. Turning away from political activism, it embraces a cultural vision of racial uplift. The poems and short stories presented in the periodical illustrate the vitality of the artistic currents on both sides of the Atlantic. Recalling the rhetoric of *The New Negro*, it combines the desire to gain access to the French socio-cultural sphere with the presentation of distinctive racial qualities. This description of a black specificity forms the background of the birth of Négritude.

In “The Race Problem in Paris and the French West Indies,” an article that was published in October 1939, Cook noted that “the younger generation in France is becoming increasingly race conscious. Difficult economic conditions and more frequent literary and personal contacts with American Negroes are giving the younger group a different view on the race problem” (677-78). At the beginning of World War II, a few months after the publication of the first version of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, the narrative of African American influence on French black intellectuals already seems to be self-evident. The evolution that we observed in the Parisian black periodicals under consideration in this chapter attests to French black intellectuals’ growing interest in African American cultural production. Locke’s *The New Negro* is, as we have seen, a key subtext for a good understanding of the change of paradigm which characterizes the development of these periodicals. However, it would be erroneous to think that the transnational perspectives displayed in *Les Continents*, *La Dépêche africaine*, and *La Revue du monde noir*, and the geographical reconfiguration of the race which takes place in the pages of these journals only concerns the French black community. Black American literature has also evolved from the

nationally-inflected vision of *The New Negro* to a truly transnational understanding of the race. A novel particularly seems to embody this important change of perspective: McKay's *Banjo*.

## Chapter 4

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### Black Vagabond Cosmopolitanism in Claude McKay's *Banjo*

Published in the early spring of 1929, McKay's second novel, *Banjo*, marked a departure from the assimilationist stances of *The New Negro*. It also presented a different perspective on primitivism. The uncompromised rejection of national loyalties and the endorsement of an essentialist view of the black race displayed in the novel can be contrasted with the opinion of the majority of the black leaders in France and in the United States at the time. Two aspects of the novel were the focus of attention in African American newspapers: the description of black people as joyful and insouciant characters, apparently unhindered by middle-class moral conservatism, and the international dimension of the black community living in Marseilles.<sup>250</sup> Several reviewers had already criticized McKay's portrayal of black life in *Home to Harlem* a year earlier. In "The Browsing Reader" of June 1928, published in the *Crisis*, Du Bois had notoriously accused him of deliberately satisfying "that prurient demand on the part of the white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of the utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying—if enjoyment it can be called" (202).<sup>251</sup> The fact that, in *Banjo*, McKay persisted in describing the low life of the black community only reinforced this impression. In *Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Wayne F. Cooper observes that, "to many in the Afro-American press, *Banjo* only confirmed their earlier conclusions about McKay" (258). Dewey R. Jones, for example, expressed his frustration in a review entitled "Dirt," published in the *Chicago Defender* of July 27, 1929: "I was disappointed with his 'Home to Harlem,' but I had hopes of

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<sup>250</sup> The novel went almost unnoticed in France when it first appeared. Translated in French in 1931, it would be crucial for the theorization of the Négritude concept, as we will see in chapter 5 – for a French review of the novel published shortly after its initial publication, see Levinson, "De Harlem à la Canebière" – see also, for a brief description of the New Negro movement, Levinson, "Aframérique."

<sup>251</sup> See also Dewey R. Jones, "More Nigger Heaven" (17 Mar. 1928).

something better in his next effort. ‘Banjo,’ if anything, is worse” (A1). If many reviews rebuked the characterization of Banjo and his friends, the international features of the novel seemed to open thought-provoking perspectives for the black intelligentsia.

In the *Chicago Defender* of July 13, 1929, Dennis A. Bethea wrote that *Banjo* would spark the readers’ interest “for its Negro philosophy.” He went on remarking that “one cannot help from seeing the oneness of mind between the West Indian, the Senegalese, the Negro of Ivory Coast of Africa or the Negro in Harlem and South-side Chicago” (A1). The worldwide unity of the race may have been what Du Bois had in mind when, in “The Browsing Reader” of July 1929, he approved of the “sort of international philosophy of the Negro Race” displayed in the novel (234). However, his interpretation of the diasporic components of *Banjo* does not match with McKay’s point of view. The extract quoted in the *Crisis* review to exemplify the novel’s ‘international philosophy’ focalizes on the situation of race relations in the United States and put forward the African American community as an example for the rest of the world:

You see race prejudice over there drives the Negroes together to develop their own group life. American Negroes have their own schools, churches, newspapers, theatres, restaurants, cabarets, hotels. They work for the whites, but they have their own social group life, an intense, throbbing, vital thing in the midst of the army of whites milling around them. There is nothing like it in the West Indies nor in Africa . . . Here in Europe you have more social liberties than Negroes have in America, but you have no warm group life (234).<sup>252</sup>

Presented as a representative sample of the novel’s insights about race and internationalism, this paragraph posits African Americans at the forefront of racial emancipation. Using McKay’s words, Du Bois reiterates here the statement that he had made in the closing essay of *The New Negro*: “led by American Negroes, the Negroes of the world are reaching out

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<sup>252</sup> The page number here is taken from Du Bois’s review. In the novel, this passage appears on page 205.

hands toward each other to know, to sympathize, to inquire” (412).<sup>253</sup> This conception of the African American community as the center from which the worldwide emancipation of the black race would ensue was central to Du Bois’s thought at the time and to the New Negro movement. By highlighting a passage in which Ray seems to praise African Americans’ sense of communal life and to attest to their leading role in the salvation of the black race, Du Bois twists the meaning of *Banjo* in order to put forward the agenda of the Talented Tenth and his own ideas about the role of African Americans beyond the national boundaries.

Unlike what Du Bois contended in the *Crisis*, McKay does not suggest the superiority of the African American model. On the contrary, he heavily criticizes the ideology of racial uplift as practiced in the United States. McKay’s novel is in fact a fierce critique of western civilization and of the abuses which inevitably stem from it. The ‘white man’s world,’ as the black drifters often call it in the novel, is founded on the capitalist principle of incessant wealth accumulation.<sup>254</sup> It is divided along racial, national and social lines and the dominant groups—governments, corporations or individuals—oppress the underprivileged in order to obtain what they yearn for. *Banjo* asks the question of black people’s place in the midst of western societies.<sup>255</sup> It concludes on a skeptical note as to the possibility for people of African descent to survive in such a heartless system. The novel rebukes contemporary models of racial emancipation which only propose assimilation to white society as a solution. In the *Crisis* review, Du Bois discards this negative judgement by excluding McKay from the

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<sup>253</sup> As we have seen in chap. 2, the insistence on African American leadership in international race relations resounded throughout the anthology – See Locke, “The New Negro,” 14; J. W. Johnson, “Harlem: the Culture Capital,” 311; W. A. Domingo, “Gift of the Black Tropics,” 341 and 348.

<sup>254</sup> The expression ‘white man’s world’ appears several times in *Banjo*. This dichotomous distinction illustrates the black vagabonds’ binary apprehension of the world. Its first occurrence is placed on the lips of Banjo who pronounces it “the white man’s wul” (80). The phrase expresses the possessive ascendancy of the whites on the world. It is sometimes varied, but still manifests white domination: “white man’s Europe” (106), “white man’s big city” (111), “white man’s civilization” (164, 241), “white man’s country” (263). The worst insult that the black drifters throw at each other is “white man’s nigger” (162, 298) – In the present chapter, I will use the expression ‘the white man’s world’—with single quotation marks—as a synonym of ‘western civilization’ to recall that the point of view presented comes from the community of black drifters living in Marseilles.

<sup>255</sup> Georges Friedmann, in his preface of the French translation, underlines this aspect of the novel (23).

conversation: “With the characteristic reaction of the West Indian who does not thoroughly know his America, he is bitter about ‘society’ Negroes in America” (234). The condescending tone of this statement relegates McKay to the margin of the African American community. The exclusive gesture performed by Du Bois stresses the tensions which sometimes surfaced between African Americans and Caribbean migrants at the time.<sup>256</sup> It also indirectly points to the increasing disagreement which separated black American leaders from the younger generation of artists who started to voice more progressive viewpoints.

McKay can be connected to a group of young writers who, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, publicly challenged the conservative opinions expressed by black leaders in *The New Negro* and elsewhere. In his biography of McKay, Cooper stresses the generational gap that divided the Harlem Renaissance. Describing the reception of *Home to Harlem*, he states that “conservative blacks greeted it with dismay, while the young—Langston Hughes chief among them—were overjoyed to find that McKay had given new life to their cause” (241). The correspondence between Hughes and McKay provides interesting elements to understand the dissension which progressively appears among black intellectuals. On March 5, 1928, Hughes congratulates his friend for the publication of *Home to Harlem*, “the most exciting thing in years.” He goes on with a statement which reveals a strong group consciousness: “undoubtedly, it is the finest thing ‘we’ve’ done yet.” In Hughes’s mind, the novel is more than an individual success; it represents a collective achievement. The sentence also implies that McKay’s work is the starting point of a literary efflorescence, which would be related to a specific group of writers. Hughes delineates this collective endeavor in opposition to the institutionalized black intelligentsia: “It’s going to be amusing reading what the colored

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<sup>256</sup> For studies on the West Indian protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance, see, Perry Mars, “Caribbean Influences in African-American Political Struggles” (2004); Joyce Moore Turner, *Caribbean Crusaders and the Harlem Renaissance* (2005); Louis J. Parascandola, “Anglophone Caribbean Immigrants in the Harlem Renaissance” (2012); Lara Putnam, “Provincializing Harlem” (2013).

papers will say about it. They will want to tear you to pieces, I'm sure, but since they used all their bad words on Nigger Heaven, and the rest on me,—I don't know what vocabulary they have left for you.”<sup>257</sup> A sort of genealogy of the movement emerges in these lines. Van Vechten's novel, published in 1926, seems to set the tone to a reaction against the bourgeois vision of culture that black leaders promote.<sup>258</sup> In the introduction to *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret* (2009), Shane Vogel explains that the insurgent movement, which he calls the ‘Cabaret School’ of the Harlem Renaissance, is characterized by a “refusal to validate or valorize the values of the black middle class” (4).<sup>259</sup> Gathering around the short-lived publication of the journal *Fire!!* (1926), the young writers show their disagreement with a strategy which construes racial uplift through a bourgeois vision of culture and promotes a black version of Americanism as a mean to social and political integration.<sup>260</sup> Du Bois and Locke promote an African American renaissance which is to result in “[the Negro's] full initiation into American democracy” (Locke, *New Negro* 16). Black art has to meet the white public's expectations. It has to be limited to a representation of the most successful elements of the black population. Along with the younger black American writers, McKay rejects these constraints and seeks to find a distinctive voice, which could express his personal experience of the race.

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<sup>257</sup> Hughes probably refers to *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), which was heavily criticized in American black journals – see Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes* (1986-88), 138-139, and Tidwell and Ragar, *Montage of a Dream* (2007), 4-5.

<sup>258</sup> Du Bois seems to be Hughes's main target. In a letter written on 13 September of the same year, he reacts to Du Bois's review of *Home to Harlem* and clearly situates the *Crisis* editor among the foes of the group: “I don't suppose you mind what DuBois says? Who does?” He responds to a letter dated from 13 June 1928, in which McKay clearly asserted his disagreement with the black leader: “I see DuBois has given me hell in the ‘Crisis.’ If he had praised me it would have been a greater surprise.”

<sup>259</sup> Vogel proposes a list of the writers who could be consider as members of this movement: Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Carl Van Vechten, Zora Neale Hurston, Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman (4).

<sup>260</sup> In his review of the journal, published in the *Survey Graphic*, on September 15, 1927, Locke deplore the “artistic secession” and “the revolt from conservatism and convention,” which characterizes the group (Molesworth 66).

The importance of McKay and his work—especially *Banjo*—has often been attenuated in narratives of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>261</sup> Gary E. Holcomb, in the introduction to *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha* (2007), explains that, “although he is an unquestionably essential New Negro figure, he is perplexing and difficult to classify within the Harlem Renaissance historical chronotope.” He goes on and develops the reasons why scholars find it difficult to apprehend McKay:

Unlike Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, he did not generate folk vernacular verse pieces during the 1920s. His celebration of black ‘primitivism,’ moreover, understandably discomfits contemporary views of black essentialism. Furthermore, his lengthy residence abroad still complicates his credentials as a Harlem Renaissance author. Generally speaking, the McKay currently familiar to the world is an anomalous pastiche of frequently incompatible identities (3).

McKay’s trajectory as a writer frustrates the scholar’s desire to understand his complex and shifting personality. *Banjo* seems to present the same difficulties. The novel is, indeed, a multifaceted work, which can be approached from multiple perspectives. The international dimension of the novel has been interpreted along two principal lines of thought. On the one hand, scholars such as Holcomb and William J. Maxwell focus on McKay’s interest in Marxism and left-wing politics and, therefore, read the novel as a propagandist work.<sup>262</sup> On the other hand, the works of Edwards, Joel Nickels and Graeme Abernethy inscribe in a diasporic context the radical internationalism which they observe in the novel.<sup>263</sup> These studies attempt to explain McKay’s progressive turning away from communism and subtly center the debate on issues of race rather than concerns for the proletariat. In “The Red Is East” (2009), James Smethurst summarizes the conundrum which probably led to these

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<sup>261</sup> For example, in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Lewis succinctly mentions its publication and presents a derogatory comment on its qualities: “*Home to Harlem* had content, if not much form. *Banjo* had little of either” (239). The seminal importance of his studies and his rejection of McKay’s novels may explain partly the little attention they received in Harlem Renaissance Studies.

<sup>262</sup> See Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha*, chap. 4; Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left* (1999), chap. 2-3. In “Banjo Meets the Dark Princess” (2007), Maxwell also inserts McKay’s novel in a diasporic understanding of the black race.

<sup>263</sup> See Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, chap. 4; Nickels, “Claude McKay and Dissident Internationalism” (2014); Abernethy, “The Beauty of Other Horizons” (2014).

diverging interpretations: “while McKay moved away from Communism and the Soviet Union . . . his fictions continued to promote a vision of an internationalist and sexually free black radicalism that was at heart proletarian” (358). Although *Banjo* retains a recognizable Marxist flavor, it ultimately rejects, as we will see in this chapter, the possibility of a transracial workers’ solidarity.<sup>264</sup> More than a commitment to the international cooperation of the proletariat, the novel puts forward a cosmopolitan project based on race essentialism.

The foreign setting of the story seems to announce the type of literary detour which takes place in several Harlem Renaissance novels. Such a detour allows the characters to experience another way of life, usually free from racial prejudices.<sup>265</sup> It transforms their perception of the American situation and enables them to come back to the United States with a different point of view. However, even though *Banjo* allows for a critique of America—and of the African American community, it does not perform the return to the point of entanglement which, in Glissant’s view, should bring the detour to its completion. Instead, the novel criticizes western civilization and shatters the illusion of France—and, more generally, of Europe—as a color-blind haven. In *Banjo*, the detour is aborted; McKay’s book concludes with a rejection of occidental values and a celebration of what we may call ‘vagabond cosmopolitanism.’ Ray and Banjo leave Marseilles at the end of the book in order to wander around the world. In their peregrination, they embrace the normative aspects of

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<sup>264</sup> In *A Long Way from Home* (1937), McKay affirms that it was the political activist Lamine Senghor who gave him the idea to write *Banjo*: “[he] was interested in my writing and said he wished I would write the truth about the Negroes in Marseilles. I promised I would some day” (278). A few pages later, he claims to remember his promise and starts writing the novel: “right then I remembered Senghor, the Senegalese, begging me to write the truth. I settled down to work and began *Banjo*” (288). This account contextualizes the book’s genesis and offers a partial explanation for the Marxist vision it displays until the very end, when Ray rejects communism.

<sup>265</sup> In the Prologue to *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards presents a list of Harlem Renaissance works in which the practice of the detour can be observed: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style*, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Du Bois’s *Dark Princess*, Eric Walrond’s *Tropic Death*, and McKay’s *Banjo* (5). In her article on Schuyler’s *Black No More*, Jane Kuenz affirms that “Europe was also, ten years after the war, as it had been before, openly regarded and publicly described as a positive alternative for African American to Jim Crow America” (173). Fabre, in the introduction to *From Harlem to Paris*, stresses the importance of the “image of tolerance and generosity shown to blacks in France” that black American soldiers brought back to the United States after World War I. He explains that black intellectuals “would use that image as an example to white American society” (2).

cosmopolitanism by the belief they display in the equal value of every human being, by the endorsement of the notion of difference as an essential element of any civilizational project, by the refusal to integrate a standardized occidental society, and by the formal rejection of national, or political, loyalties. This cosmopolitan vision is paradoxically based on the premise of an essential race spirit. McKay believes that people of African descent possess certain primitive qualities of which the white man is devoid. The likelihood for the black man of losing his primeval gift, and, therefore, his distinct identity, constitutes for McKay the great tragedy of his presence in the midst of western civilization. The salvation of the black race depends on the rediscovery and the reclaiming of its unique soul.

### **Western Society and Capitalism: “The Jungles of Civilization”**

*Banjo* can be interpreted as a diatribe against the evils of the ‘white world.’ An episode at the beginning of the novel seems to set the tone for the derogatory judgements which pervade the novel. The main scene of the chapter titled “Hard Feeding” strikingly depicts a group of white and black panhandlers feeding themselves with leftovers thrown at them by the cabin crew of a boat that recently entered the port. As soon as the meal is brought up on the deck, the famished vagrants metamorphose into beasts, ready to fight for their nourishment: “all the men rushed the food like swine, each roughly elbowing and snapping at the other to get his hand in first” (40). This obscene feeding degenerates into a fight that Banjo watches with aversion: “[he] was standing a little way off, watching the *mêlée* in anger and contempt” (41). His situation of observer positions him as a privileged witness and commentator of the scene. Together with him, the readers are invited to scorn the demeaning behavior of these men. However, this description is not only a graphical example of the struggle that forms the backdrop of the drifters’ existence on the docks. It constitutes a broader metaphor for a representation of the western world as a threatening wilderness. The

vagabonds, black and white alike, have to strive to subsist in a hostile environment. By the end of the novel, the narrator asserts that they live “in a society rooted and thriving on the principles of the ‘struggle for existence’ and the ‘survival of the fittest’” (319). Borrowed from the terminology of evolutionary theories and adapted to social Darwinism, these expressions draw a parallel between society and wilderness. In *Banjo*, the jungle as a metaphor for a savage capitalist world becomes a descriptive pattern which functions both as a direct criticism of the system and a tacit undermining of the discourse sustaining it, through a reversal of expressions usually applied to peoples considered backward and uncivilized.

Through the episodes that punctuate the novel, McKay cast a critical eye over modern society. Like Banjo, who observes the scene described above from afar, Ray, who becomes the spokesperson of the black vagabonds, comments upon occidental society from a liminal vantage point. McKay’s deliberate choice to assess modernity from the perspective of a marginalized group is not without significance. In the first essay of *Cosmopolitanism* (2002), Sheldon Pollock and his colleagues insist on “the critique of modernity that minoritarian cosmopolitans embody in their historic witness to the twentieth century” (6).<sup>266</sup> More than Banjo or any other characters, Ray understands the singularity of his situation: “he was not unaware that his position as a black boy looking on the civilized scene was a unique one” (136). The originality of his point of view stems from his marginal position within society. His peripheral location allows for a critique of the world in which he lives. McKay presents his distinctive opinion through the eyes of his main characters, Banjo and Ray. Michael B.

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<sup>266</sup> The type of cosmopolitanism that Banjo and Ray put into practice is similar to Stuart Hall’s ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ and Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ in the sense that it also emanates from a peripheral space that allows a reconsideration of the fundamental assumptions of western society. In this sense, it also echoes Walter D. Mignolo’s concept of ‘border thinking’ that he defines, in “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis” (2000), as “the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions” (736-37). Unlike Hall and Bhabha, the ‘vagabond cosmopolitanism’ of Ray and Banjo necessitates, as we will see later in the chapter, a deliberate decision to reject the limiting categories of the occidental world – see Stuart Hall and Pnina Werbner, “Cosmopolitanism, Globalisation and Diaspora” (2008), and Homi K. Bhabha, “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism” (1996).

Stoff emphasizes “the juxtapositioning [sic] of the instinctive black man and the educated Negro” as a pattern that allows McKay to clarify his statement. Whereas Ray, who can be considered McKay’s alter ego, stands for the educated thinker, Banjo is inextricably connected to first-hand, real-life experience.<sup>267</sup> He literally embodies in practice the outcome of his friend’s thoughts. Even more, his actions inform Ray’s speculations and shape his final conclusions. The presence in the novel of this dualistic dimension opens a space where theory and practice echo each other in a dialogical and contrapuntal way.<sup>268</sup> The association of two characters gives depth to McKay’s argument which can be presented from two different, but nonetheless complementary, perspectives.

In the novel, McKay subverts literary tropes and received ideas in order to acknowledge the historical reality which is concealed behind western discourses. Abernethy claims at the end of his article that, in *Banjo*, “the ostensibly savage and the ostensibly civilized are rarely what they seem” (458). Although his subject concerns the sartorial stylization of the characters, his remark reveals one of the principal mechanisms of the ‘white world,’ seen through Ray’s eyes. Romantic impressions hide the oppression and exploitation which take place within the confines of western society. In the sixth chapter, Ray decides to remain in Marseilles to work as a writer, a dream he pursues since *Home to Harlem*. In order to find inspiration, he often walks along the waterfront. The depiction of the quays, as he strolls in the midst of the crowd, focuses on visual and olfactory elements of the scenery. McKay inventories the merchandise displayed on the docks and alludes to the far-off regions of their provenance: “Grain from Canada, rice from India, rubber from the Congo, tea from

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<sup>267</sup> In his review, Du Bois states that Ray “probably is largely a counterpart of the author” (234). In “De Harlem à la Canebière,” Levinson relays this interpretation to the French public. This chapter concurs with this point of view.

<sup>268</sup> It would be erroneous, however, to claim, following Smethurst’s argument in “The Red Is East,” that *Banjo* leads to “a utopian marriage of the proletariat and an alienated radical black intelligentsia” (360). As we will see, both Banjo and Ray ultimately reject a proletarian way of life.

China, brown sugar from Cuba, bananas from Guinea, lumber from the Soudan, coffee from Brazil, skins from the Argentine [sic], palm-oil from Nigeria, pimento from Jamaica, wool from Australia, oranges from Spain and oranges from Jerusalem . . . the fine harvest of all the lands of the earth” (67). The crowd working on the port also serves to evoke distant places, suggestive of exotic adventures: “There any day [Ray] might meet with picturesque proletarians from far waters whose names were warm with romance: the Caribbean, the Gulf of Guinea, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal, the China Seas, the Indian Archipelago” (67). McKay progressively transforms these thrilling descriptions into images of black men toiling under a burning sun: “Eternal creatures of the warm soil, digging, plucking for the Occident world its exotic nourishment of life, under the whip, under the terror. Barrels . . . bags . . . boxes . . . Full of the wonderful things of life” (67). The irony of the last comment draws to a close a depiction which moved from the romance of empire to an implicit indictment of colonial oppression. The narrator goes on with a catalogue of the different types of black people that Ray meets on the docks: “Negroes speaking the civilized tongues, Negroes speaking all the African dialects, black Negroes, brown Negroes, yellow Negroes” (68). This second enumeration directly parallels the inventory of merchandises listed in the last paragraphs, thus highlighting the system’s unacceptable capitalization on black bodies. Starting from the colorful image of the docks where tropical commodities are exhibited, McKay overthrows romanticized ideas of exotic places and bluntly exposes the reality of colonial exploitation. Western nations, such as France, derive their material comfort from the subjugation and forced labor of colonial subjects.

However, exploitation is not limited to the colonies. A more discreet, but no less degrading, form of domination is implemented in the Ditch, the red-light district of the city. Prostitution stems from the capitalist logic which sustains western societies. In the novel, Banjo meets a taxi driver who admits making money out of this sordid business. Although his

purpose may seem honorable—to buy a cottage where he could live with his wife, Ray unequivocally condemns his undertaking and denounces the system that enables it:

He was merely one illustration of the sound business sense inherent to the life of the Ditch. There was no mistaking the scheme of life of the Ditch, that bawdiness was only a means toward the ultimate purpose of respectability. And that was why it was so hard on simple seamen and beach boys who came to it with romantic ideas as a place of loose pleasure (248).

The exploitation of underprivileged people in order to accumulate wealth and, thus, obtain social recognition is a reality that the ‘simple seamen and beach boys’ often ignore because of the ‘romantic ideas’ they have of places like the Ditch. In a letter to Hughes, dated from March 30, 1928, McKay affirms that the choice of his topic constitutes an unprecedented approach of the port city: “The French literati will not like it. They have never touched Marseille, I understand, except in the romantic sense.”<sup>269</sup> McKay is aware that the aspect of the city which he decides to depict has not yet been the subject of literary explorations. We can also safely assume that he was familiar with the many representations of prostitutes which pervaded nineteenth-century literature and art. Presenting a romanticized version of prostitution, these depictions could induce the kind of naïve attitude that some visitors of the Ditch display. *Banjo* unapologetically describes the darker side of the city and exposes the capitalist machinery which reduces human lives to a crushing subjection.

The remunerative aspect of business seems to take precedence over ethical considerations. McKay even suggests that the system obeys its own moral laws. The use of the adjective ‘sound’ to define the mercantile discernment of the chauffeur emphasizes the perversity of a system where his choice appears to be the most reasonable and sensible alternative. Ray understands that the difference which separates him from the taxi driver lies in a single quality: “the instinct of civilization” (289). Reversing the stereotypical trope of the

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<sup>269</sup> During World War II, the red-light district that *Banjo* and his friends call ‘the Ditch’ was razed to the ground. McKay’s claim that it had seldom been depicted in literature turns out to be correct. *Banjo* therefore constitutes a priceless archival document – see Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 189.

instinctive and emotional black man, he notes that the chauffeur knows intuitively how to make his way in society. He comprehends the rules of the game and acts accordingly. The taxi driver is but an example of a more general pattern inherited from a long history of unscrupulous exploitation. Ray tells Banjo that “it took over a thousand years of lily-white culture to make him what he is” (289). His affirmation illustrates the weight of historical processes on individual lives and situates occidental modernity in a long sequence of unjust oppressions. Everything contributes to the satisfaction of the needs of a profit-oriented system centered on selfishness that Ray describes, subverting again a stereotype usually applied to black communities, as “the jungles of civilization” (194). Property ownership is seen as the ultimate goal and individuals have to struggle to survive in an environment where only those who are ready to crush their competitors can hope to secure a decent life. All sorts of evils inevitably emerge from such a fundamental set of beliefs.

Ray identifies three principal discriminations which result from the implementation of capitalism: nationalism, racism, and class distinctions. The first one leads people to choose a geographical, and cultural, space as a determining factor of identity. Nationality, understood as a category, is defined according to patterns of exclusion and inclusion. The individual’s ability to relate to others depends on his recognition of an adherence to the same ‘imagined community,’ to use Benedict Anderson’s famous coinage. However, the realization of a shared nationality does not prevent opposition and hatred. Ray’s definition of the nation manifests the competitive aspect that unavoidably characterizes societies where material success is the only end and where individualism forms the center of an unending quest for wealth: “a swarming hive of human beings bartering, competing, exploiting, lying, cheating, battling, suppressing, and killing among themselves; possessing, too, the faculty to organize their villainous rivalries into a monstrous system for plundering weaker people” (137). Capitalism, Ray affirms, sharpens antagonisms among people who should live together

peacefully. The economic reality determines the relations between the different people which form the nation. In addition to this dreadful picture, Ray goes a step further and acknowledges the fact that the rivalry which opposes individuals in society also pertains to international relations: “he was grinning at the civilized world of nations, all keeping their tiger’s claws sharp and strong under the thin cloak of international amity and awaiting the first favourable opportunity to spring” (135). Reiterating the metaphor of wilderness, Ray underlines the national antagonisms which oppose European countries. The concept of ‘nationality’ is a divisive category which leads individuals to despise entire populations on the ground that they do not belong to the same abstract community.

Similarly, racism sets people against each other. Ray makes clear that he believes that racial discrimination directly stems from the capitalist system: “Prejudices . . . changing chameleon-like, according to place and time, like the color of the white man’s soul, controlled by the exigencies of the white man’s business” (193). Acknowledging the mutability of the phenomenon, he subordinates it to the whims of the market. Economic activity once again shapes social relations. In such a context, racial prejudices logically supplement material greed. Racism forestalls interracial cooperation and dooms any fruitful collaborative effort between white and black workers to failure. Instead of joining forces to improve their social status and working conditions, they distrust each other, thus strengthening the power of the dominant class. The intersection of race and class only complicates the situation and reinforces the animosity between the two groups. According to Ray, discrimination would endure “so long as the pound is lord and the dollar is king and the white man exalts business above humanity” (194). The competitive nature of the system rules out interpersonal sympathies and prevents transversal solidarities.

The heightened competition encouraged by the system does not only prevent the unification of the working class across racial boundaries, it also disunites the black

community along social lines. Following the advice of race leaders such as Du Bois and Locke, young black people consider education an imperative priority. It seems to be the only way to achieve upward social mobility and respectability. In his dialogue with a student from Martinique, however, Ray warns against the pursuit of education at any cost and lucidly remarks that knowledge can become a powerful means of subjugation: “You get a white man’s education and learn to despise your own people. You read biased history of the whites conquering the colored and primitive peoples, and it thrills you just as it does a white boy belonging to a great white nation” (200-201).<sup>270</sup> Without even realizing it, educated black intellectuals despise the lower class of their race by adopting a vision of the world defined through western norms. The black middle-class thus contributes to a system which, in the end, only benefits the dominant class. McKay denounces the absurdity of a vision of racial emancipation conceived on the acceptance of the compartmentalization of the race. In the chapter devoted to *Banjo*, Holcomb stresses that “Ray insists that the ‘educated Negroes’ from the North, in their top-down, ostensibly pragmatic philosophy of striving to join the white middle-class and capitalist economy, contribute to the very ideology they believe they oppose” (151). Education ultimately stops black intellectuals from successfully helping the race. Reinforcing the power of the white dominant classes, it contributes to the confinement and alienation of the black working class and misdirects the potential for change that black intellectuals incarnate. Because of the bourgeois objectives of the African American middle class, the masses find themselves insulated from the more successful elements of their race. McKay’s criticism casts doubt on the very idea of the Talented Tenth. He deplores the fact that educated black people choose to integrate the occidental system of education and fight for their place in white society. The division of the black race according to class distinctions

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<sup>270</sup> Arthur Schomburg’s article in *The New Negro*, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” shows his awareness of the problem. Deploring the lack of objectivity of historical accounts written by white historians, he calls for “the rewriting of many important paragraphs of our common American history” (232).

ultimately hinders social and political emancipation. Nations, races, and classes, in the end, only benefit an oppressing capitalist world. Over the course of the novel, Ray progressively rejects these stifling categories in order to embrace a cosmopolitan perspective.

### **Black Cosmopolitanism: Rejecting Western Categories**

In order to resist an alienating system of divisions, McKay proposes in *Banjo* a model of solidarities that echoes Appiah's theory of ethical cosmopolitanism, based on a sense of shared humanity: instead of identifying with the vague notion of humanity, individuals should seek to display a benevolent attitude toward others in their immediate surrounding. In *The Ethics of Identity*, Appiah draws attention to "the circles among the many circles narrower than the human horizon that are appropriate spheres of moral concern" (246).<sup>271</sup> Banjo seems to lead an insouciant life. His surname, Daily, attests to his lighthearted attitude towards life. However, he is not a selfish person and shows a sincere concern for people in distress. He does not take into account racial barriers when he has to assist unfortunate others. In the twelfth chapter, he does not hesitate, in spite of the objections of his black friends, to give five francs to "a small pinch-faced white boy" so that he can buy something to eat (161). The episode reminds Ray of similar circumstances, "some time after the Amritsar massacre," when he walked with two Indians and did not dare to give alms to a British, one-armed man because his two companions refused to help a beggar who comes from an imperialist nation: "Ray felt ashamed. Ashamed that the man should be forced to beg. Ashamed of the refusal. Ashamed of himself. Ashamed of humanity" (163). His remorse ranges from an indefinite sadness for a situation prompted by an unfair system to a feeling of guilt stemming from a sense of shared humanity. The idea that he is responsible—or, at least, should feel

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<sup>271</sup> See also Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 162-63, and *Ethics of Identity*, 267-68, and Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" (1996).

responsible—for what happens to other people is, according to Appiah, the foundation of a cosmopolitan attitude toward others. In the introduction to *Cosmopolitanism*, he argues that “the one thought that cosmopolitans share is that no local loyalty can ever justify forgetting that each human being has responsibilities to every other” (xiv). In *Banjo*, western civilization is in direct opposition with such an ideal. Nationalism, racism, and class antagonisms strengthen a mistrust of the stranger and forestall the development of empathic feelings for culturally and racially different others. Ray decides to resist the system and renounces the dividing distinctions that the ‘white man’s world’ imposes.

He deliberately chooses to reject nationalism. His travels have opened his eyes on the question and, as a result, “he enjoy[s] his role of a wandering black without patriotic or family ties” (136).<sup>272</sup> The allusion to familial relations is significant. In chapter 20, when Banjo is confined to his hospital bed, he reconsiders the situation in which he finds himself: “Banjo’s thoughts at last reluctantly turned to America as home” (249).<sup>273</sup> In need of support, he thinks of his family and, with the help of Ray, attempts to contact an old aunt in the United States. Family links seem to be the only reason for Banjo to consider a place as home.<sup>274</sup> It is important to understand that he only contemplates this possibility as a last resort. Like Ray, he is an exile vagabond and enjoys his status of world citizen. As we have seen in the first part of the chapter, Ray’s conception of a nation stresses the struggles, both external and internal, that necessarily characterize it. Nationalism forms a conundrum with which he can hardly come to terms: “It seemed a most unnatural thing to him for a man to love a nation” (137). The

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<sup>272</sup> In an undated letter to Hughes, probably written at the end of 1927 or at the beginning of 1928, McKay claims to be rootless: “I am really a poet without a country. Maybe that is why I have an international mind.” This statement seems to reinforce the idea that Ray is his fictional alter-ego.

<sup>273</sup> McKay seems to have lived this experience as well during his stay in France. In the undated letter quoted in the previous footnote, he expresses his desire to come back to the United States: “I am thinking of coming home next fall or winter. I write of America as home.”

<sup>274</sup> The importance of close relations has been taken into consideration by cosmopolitan thinkers – see, for example, Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” 160; Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 223-30.

vagabond does not accept to be restricted by national allegiances. Instead, he marvels at the beauty of the world and enjoys his freedom of movement: “Man loves places and no one place, for the earth, like a beautiful wanton, puts on a new dress to fascinate him wherever he may go” (137).<sup>275</sup> Indefatigable traveler, Ray leaves behind national rivalries and embraces the world as home.

Banjo, more than any other character, embodies this ideal. Indeed, from the beginning of the novel, he seems to escape the limitations of an identity defined by nationality. He enters the scene in the first sentence of the novel in a movement that metaphorically exemplifies the unpredictability of his wandering: “heaving along from side to side, like a sailor on the unsteady deck of a ship, Lincoln Agrippa Daily, familiarly known as Banjo, patrolled the magnificent length of the great backwater of Marseilles, a banjo in his hand” (3). The readers soon learn that he comes from the Southern part of the United States: “everything about him—accent, attitude, and movement—shouted Dixie” (11-12). However, the narrator carefully avoids confining him to this geographical area. He affirms that “Banjo was a great vagabond of lowly life. He was a child of the Cotton Belt, but he had wandered all over America” (11). Having fought the war in the Canadian army, he decides to be deported from the United States for having contravened the immigration laws: “he calmly announced that he was not an American” (11). Commenting on Banjo’s choice, Holcomb clarifies that “Banjo’s insistence that he is ‘foreign’ . . . illustrates that his national identity is not a constitutive part of his personal selfhood” (149-50). Banjo considers himself a citizen of the world. His wanderings allow him to travel around the earth: “it was four months and nineteen days after sailing down through the Panama Canal to New Zealand and Australia, cruising cargo around

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<sup>275</sup> The feminization of the earth in this statement reflects the masculinist perspective which pervades *Banjo*. In a similar gesture, later in the novel, Ray puts forward the idea that “society is feminine” (206). At the end of the novel, Banjo refuses Ray’s suggestion to take Latnah along. The homosocial dimension of the black community described in the novel is somehow counterbalanced by the feminization of places – for a brief analysis of this aspect of the novel, see, Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 208-09.

the island continent and up along the coast of Africa, before his dirty ‘broad’ reached the port of Marseille” (12). His trajectory does not follow the route that people travelling between the United States and Europe would take. Smethurst remarks that “Banjo’s travels describe a diasporic arc that is global in reach and not simply trans-Atlantic” (359). This unusual journey demonstrates the unconventional attitude of Banjo and illustrates his open-mindedness and his curiosity. Borders do not seem to restrict his freedom. A category such as nationality is irrelevant to him. Both the presentation of the main character at the beginning of the book, and Ray’s later denunciation of nationalist ideologies, match the broader concern of the novel. Ultimately, it is not only geographical frontiers that the characters repudiate, but the very concept of civilization based on distinctions and differentiations.

The novel itself, in its stylistic aspect, seems to partake in a refusal of conventions and a rejection of established forms. Banjo’s peregrinations are not restricted to the textual limits of the novel. He appears in the first scene a few days after arriving in Marseille and, at the end of the novel, leaves the city with his friend Ray on his way to an undefined destination. The last sentence of the novel does not sound like an ending, but presages the beginning of a new adventure: “Wese got enough between us to beat it a long ways from here” (336). Banjo’s journey around the world goes beyond the limits of the books both in terms of spatial and temporal dimension. This insubordination to the Aristotelian rules of narration constitutes another way of resisting an omnipresent western civilization.<sup>276</sup> In both the reviews and the academic literature about *Banjo*, many commentators reproached McKay for the absence of a coherent storyline.<sup>277</sup> The subtitle of the book warns the readers about the voluntary omission: ‘a story without a plot.’ The absence of a defining element of narration signals the dissident

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<sup>276</sup> In *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks reminds his readers that, according to Aristotle, a narrative “must have a beginning, a middle, and an end” (11).

<sup>277</sup> In his review, Du Bois explains that *Banjo* “is in no sense a novel, either in the nature of its story or in the development of character” (234). Levinson would also criticize this aspect of the novel in “De Harlem à la Canebière” – for a scholarly critique of this aspect, see Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* 239.

attitude of McKay. Unlike Maran, who attempted to prove with *Batouala* that a black writer could achieve as good a result as a white author in an established form, McKay voluntarily refuses to let his 'story' be categorized as a 'novel.' By repudiating a genre which has often been associated with national narratives, he shows his desire to question occidental literary traditions and resists, in a sense, western cultural hegemony.<sup>278</sup> Banjo's disregard for national boundaries, Ray's dismissal of the concepts of nation, and McKay's renunciation of the plot constitutes similar types of resistance to a system founded on a divisive ideology which bolsters antagonisms between individuals and communities.

In a like manner, racism is a source of conflict. It deprives men of their altruistic nature and sets them against each other. The narrator describes Ray's outburst of anger when he denounces its alienating effects: "He hated civilization because its general attitude toward the colored man was such as to rob him of his warm human instincts and make him inhuman" (163). Black people seem to be especially vulnerable to the corrupting effects of a belief system that prevents them from behaving humanly. However, Ray makes clear that racism does not only harm its most obvious victims. The implementation of racial discriminations limits its perpetrators without allowing them to be aware of the restricting effect of their behavior: "it was white people who were the great wearers of veils, shadowing their lives and the lives of other peoples by them" (272).<sup>279</sup> Reversing Du Bois' metaphor of the veil, McKay demonstrates how racism delineates confined existences and prevents new perspectives on life. Like the concept of nation, the idea of race results in a compartmentalization of society and forestalls fruitful contacts across cultural and social boundaries. Racism is intrinsically

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<sup>278</sup> In his landmark work, *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson, talking about the newspaper and the novel, clarifies that "these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (25).

<sup>279</sup> In Chapter 11, Ray comes to the same conclusion about national allegiances: "A patriot loves not his nation, but the spiritual meannesses of his life of which he has created a frontier wall to hide the beauty of other horizons" (137).

anti-cosmopolitan and the presence of people of African descent at the heart of occidental society constitutes an opportunity to go beyond the restrictive paradigm of racial prejudices: “if the Negro had to be defined, there was every reason to define him as a challenge rather than a ‘problem’ to Western civilization” (273).<sup>280</sup> This statement fortuitously echoes Appiah’s claim, at the beginning of *Cosmopolitanism*, that “there’s a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge” (xiii). To live together peacefully is the demanding task that awaits human beings, independently of their racial, or national, identities.

Ray understands that to achieve this goal people have to learn to respect otherness. In one of the many discussions he has about race, he asserts his belief that: “the most precious thing about human life is difference” (208).<sup>281</sup> Nowhere more than in the many descriptions of the crowds is the celebration of diversity more palpable. When Ray strolls about the port, he cannot help being enthralled by the variety of people he could meet on the docks (66-69). Although this description ultimately serves another purpose, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, it also conveys the immediate excitement of being part of such a multifarious aggregate of human life. The accumulation of substantives transmits the tumultuous activity surrounding the characters and accentuates the euphoria Ray experiences as he walks through the crowd. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator had also briefly described the inhabitants of the port: “They were all on the beach, and there were many others besides them—white men, brown men, black men. Finns, Poles, Italians, Slavs, Maltese, Indians, Negroids, African Negroes, West Indian Negroes . . . all dumped down in the great Provençal

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<sup>280</sup> McKay echoes Du Bois’s opening inquiry in *Souls*: “how does it feel to be a problem?” (101). He thus implicitly criticize the black leader’s approach to the question of racial uplift.

<sup>281</sup> The subject of the discussion is miscegenation. Ray claims that he is not against it, but nevertheless specifies that he would not advocate it: “I should hate to think of a future in which the identity of the black race in the Western World should be lost in miscegenation” (208). Behind the cosmopolitan perspective that Ray displays is a concern for the conservation of the black race’s specificities.

port” (6). This enumeration seems at first sight to classify the drifters of the docks according to national and racial categories. However, the triple iteration that precedes it—‘white men, brown men, black men’—puts it into perspective.<sup>282</sup> In spite of all the divisions, all the distinctions, McKay chooses to emphasize their shared humanity.

However, in *Banjo*, cosmopolitanism does not only imply a jubilant recognition of a commonality. It is also performed as an active rejection of certain categories imposed by society. The vagabond way of life that Ray chooses to adopt at the end of the book is a conscious refusal to be limited by such categories. Fleeing capitalism and its avatars, he escapes from “the ever tightening mechanical organization of modern life” (324). The journey he undertakes with Banjo at the end of the novel designates him as a ‘rootless cosmopolitan,’ an expression that Appiah construes, in *Cosmopolitanism*, as “a man with no strong sense of national or local identity” (4).<sup>283</sup> What Ray and Banjo embody in their aimless peregrinations is a desire to discover the world without being tied by constraining loyalties: “Man loves individuals. Man loves things. Man loves places. And the vagabond lover of life finds individuals and things to love in many places and not in one nation” (144). Turned towards different others in an open-minded attitude, they want to discover new cultural or geographical horizons. Not afraid of being confronted with different ways of living and different worldviews, they begin their journey at the end of the book, insouciant, as two cosmopolitan vagabonds.

### **Race Essentialism: ‘Down to the Racial Roots’**

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<sup>282</sup> It also reinforces the masculinist perspective of the novel by emphasizing the common gender of the individuals which constitute the crowd.

<sup>283</sup> Appiah’s main argument in *Cosmopolitanism* is for a ‘rooted cosmopolitanism,’ or a ‘cosmopolitan patriotism’ as defined in “Cosmopolitan Patriots.”

The choice of a vagabond life also means for Ray an attempt at recapturing the spirit of his race. Torn between his education and his racial identity, he cannot find his place in western society. According to Stoff, McKay displays, both in *Home to Harlem* and in *Banjo*, “a vision of the intellectual, and especially the black intellectual, as social misfit” (133). Ray studied western culture and history. He has assimilated the social codes of the occidental world. At the same time, the narrator specifies that “he had associated too closely with the beach boys not to realize that their loose, instinctive way of living was more deeply related to his own self-preservation than all the principles, or social-morality lessons with which he had been inculcated by the wiseacres of the civilized machine” (319). Intellect and emotions, reason and instincts seem to form conflicting forces which collide in Ray’s soul.<sup>284</sup> Unable to indulge without reservation into the life of the vagabonds, he cannot partake fully in the cultural life of the ‘white man’s world.’ Hampered by his education when he tries to surrender to the insouciant philosophy of Banjo, he is not entirely accepted, or even recognized, by the circles of white intellectuals because of his skin color.<sup>285</sup>

In “Diaspora and Cosmopolitanism” (2011), Vinay Dharwadker proposes a distinction which could clarify Ray’s dilemma in *Banjo*. He differentiates the ‘hybrid subject’ from the ‘cosmopolitan subject.’ The former constructs her identity by combining two cultural backgrounds: “the hybrid subject inhabits a single culture of her own, which emerges in the intermingling of two prior cultures; she mixes (and mixes up) their codes, and is no longer fully at home in either of its unmixed form” (140). On the contrary, the ‘cosmopolitan subject’ is “culturally ambidextrous,” which means, as Dharwadker explains, that she is able to adapt her behavior to her immediate surrounding. She can therefore switch from one set of

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<sup>284</sup> Senghor would also make the same kind of distinction in “Ce que l’homme noir apporte” (1939): “l’émotion est nègre comme la raison hellène” (24) – “Emotion is black as reason is Hellenic.”

<sup>285</sup> This situation was also experienced by McKay who, in his autobiography, wrote: “What, then, was my main problem? It was the problem of color. Color-consciousness was the fundamental of my restlessness” (245) – see also, Lewis, 51 and 55, and Stoff, 130.

social codes to another without feeling maladjusted: “a cosmopolitan differentiates among her cultural locations” (140). In *Banjo*, hybridity is experienced as a form of alienation. Ray does not feel an integral part of the group of black vagabonds living in the port. At the same time, he does not have the opportunity to enter educated circles. Within western society, black intellectuals have no choice but to attempt to assimilate white culture and deny their racial background. The racial prejudices of the system, however, do not grant them the place he deserves as cultivated people.

That is precisely the reason why Ray criticizes the African American model of racial uplift: it promotes instruction as the only way to gain acceptance in American society. Caught between two worlds, black intellectuals do not belong entirely to one. Ray challenges an understanding of progress which only sanctions education as a mean to ameliorate race relations. At the beginning the chapter entitled “The Blue Cinema,” Ray forewarns the young student from Martinique of the disillusionment that awaits him at the end of his studies:

When you come to maturity you realize with a shock that you don't and can't belong to the white race. All your education and achievements cannot put you in the intimate circles of the whites and give you a white man's full opportunity. However advanced, clever, and cultivated you are, you will have the distinguishing adjective of 'colored' before your name. And instead of accepting it proudly and manfully, most of you are soured and bitter about it (201).

In addition to the estrangement from the black masses along class divisions underlined earlier, education does not allow the black intellectual to be assimilated to white society. The strategy advocated by the New Negro movement is doomed to failure. It divides the black community and does not even permit its better elements to gain recognition. The dream of a color-blind society where people would be judged according to their merits is but a mirage which does not improve the everyday reality of black people, cultivated or not.

If a connection with the white elite is not possible, Ray also considers for a while the possibility of joining forces with the white proletariat in order to fight against capitalist

oppression. At the end of the novel, the narrator acknowledges this unfulfilled desire: “with the growth of international feelings and ideas he had dreamed of the association of his race with the social movements of the masses of civilization milling through the civilized machine” (324). His initial encounter with the drifters of the port in a proletarian and interracial milieu had raised hopes of solidarity and mutual assistance. However, at the end of the novel, Ray decides to adopt a skeptical position: “Traveling away from America and visiting many countries, observing and appreciating the differences of human groups, making contact with earthy blacks of tropical Africa, where the great body of the race existed, had stirred in him the fine intellectual prerogative of doubt” (324). It is interesting to note that, aside from Ray’s travel experience and observations, it is the contact with the ancestral continent which finally lead him to embrace a critical attitude. The choice of not being in solidarity with workers and socialist reformers constitutes a departure from what Ray—and McKay—had professed earlier.<sup>286</sup> In fact, the apparent rejection of Marxist theory comes from a realization that the proletariat is unwillingly responsible for the implementation of racial discriminations. Earlier in the novel, Ray had clearly affirmed his contempt for the white masses: “I hate the proletarian spawn of civilization. They are ugly, stupid, unthinking, degraded, full of vicious prejudices, which any demagogue can play upon to turn them into a hell-raising mob at any time” (270). In this statement, he unequivocally states his belief that the working class emerges from the system. Being easily manipulated, it keeps alive racial prejudices. The black vagabonds cannot therefore participate in the proletarian struggle against capitalism.

If racism prevents interracial solidarity among workers, race does not form an obstacle to the cosmopolitan ideal. Echoing Du Bois’s predicament in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Ray

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<sup>286</sup> See, Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 199; Smethurst, 358; Nickels, 4-5.

would like to be able to assert simultaneously his educational background and his racial identity: “[he] wanted to hold on to his intellectual acquirements without losing his instinctive gifts” (322-23). He longs to be, or to become, Dharwadker’s ‘cosmopolitan subject.’ However, he soon realizes that to be able to enjoy instinctively the life of the black vagabonds without necessarily forsaking his inquiring mind is an almost impossible task. He is aware that “whether the educated man be white or brown or black, he cannot . . . be irresponsibly happy like the ignorant man who lives simply by his instincts and appetites” (323). The assertion of his racial individuality nevertheless forms the first step towards the liberation from the occidental ascendancy over him and, by extension, over the black race in general. To remain with Banjo would allow him “to learn how to live—how to exist as a black boy in a white world and rid his conscience of the used-up hussy of white morality” (322). Ray understands that he has to rediscover and reclaim his black self in order to be able to redefine the place of black people in the midst of an antagonistic civilization. He consequently suggests, as a preliminary stage, a rediscovery and a redefinition of racial identity: “if this renaissance we’re talking about is going to be more than a sporadic and scabby thing, we’ll have to get down to our racial roots to create it” (200). This statement implies that the black renaissance has to be reassessed and to be developed anew on a racial foundation.

In *Banjo*, McKay articulates race essentialism as the necessary step toward a successful revival of black culture. Primitivist discourse, which forms the artistic expression of this belief, is therefore necessary. Gina M. Rossetti claims, in *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature*, that, for African American writers, primitivism was a way to indulge in “a kind of celebration of black sensuality” (146).<sup>287</sup> For McKay, however, it does not consist in a glorification of black people’s sensual nature aimed at appealing to a

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<sup>287</sup> This kind of argument formed the core of the black American press’ critique of *Banjo*.

white audience eager to confirm its stereotypes. Primitivism in the novel is a stimulating instrument of reflection that Rossetti defines as “a counterhegemonic ideological tool by which [the] modernists are able to distance themselves from the dominant culture” (149). This type of discourse becomes an attempt to circumvent the stifling categories imposed by western civilization and to preserve a black identity threatened by the standardization of society. The desire to turn to primitivism seems to situate McKay’s speculations in accordance with *The New Negro*. Locke used primitivist discourse to satisfy, as we have seen, the expectations of white audiences. The qualities inherent to people of African descent were presented as the panacea which would redeem the modern world. However, in McKay’s novel, race essentialism is not conceived as a means to salvage western civilization. It rather allows black people to flee from the fundamental assumptions of occidental society and their detrimental consequences, and to rediscover a more authentic identity. Working against occidental hegemony, it offers an alternative to the assimilationist views of racial uplift.

It is important at this point to make a distinction between the idea of race essentialism and the primitivist resonances presented in *Banjo*, and the theoretical concept which Baker uses as the thread of his seminal study, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, namely the ‘mastery of form.’<sup>288</sup> Although Ray and Banjo are well aware that “the general European idea of the black man is that he is a public performer” (323), they do not engage in make-believe and counterfeit a type of primitivism that would suit the white man’s taste. They do not adopt the discourse and attitude which would be expected of them in order to draw the white audience’s attention. On the contrary, in *Banjo*, race essentialism allows the protagonists to escape a self-destructive system of beliefs and to affirm their distinctive individualities. Banjo is not interested in the political or cultural impact his philosophy could have. He does not

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<sup>288</sup> See, Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 16-24.

think about the past and does not worry about the future. He simply lives from day to day, thus unconsciously affirming “the depths of his soul and the soul of his race—the true tropical African Negro” (322). His primitive black soul shelters him from the hostile environment through which he has to navigate.

Ray’s more speculative attitude helps him to understand the protective dimension of a black primitive identity: “Even though [Africans] stood bewildered before the imposing bigness of the white things, apparently unaware of the invaluable worth of their own, they were naturally defended by the richness of their fundamental racial values” (320). Ray finally comes to the conclusion that race, defined in essentialist terms, is the antidote that could ensure black people’s self-preservation in the occidental world. The salvation of the black renaissance depends on the awareness of the positive value of primitivism and the need to return—in Glissant’s sense—to the African cultural heritage. Rossetti affirms that “Ray turns his back on middle-class black uplift rhetoric because it causes him to deny his individuality and verve for life” (164).<sup>289</sup> According to McKay, black people have to stop living in denial; they need to rediscover their inner self. They have to reject western standards in order to seek a more instinctive way to approach art and culture. The concept of race, as presented in *Banjo*, rests upon the idea of a fixity of identity. To recover the primitive spirit of Africa implies a reconnection to the soul of the race, to a biologically and culturally determined identity which allows black people to face their white counterparts as equals. Subverting the opposition that forced black and white people to confront each other antagonistically, primitivism creates a new ground where it is possible to share different worldviews and to cultivate an idea of cultural diversity.

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<sup>289</sup> Although this statement is about Ray in *Home to Harlem*, it can be applied to *Banjo* as well.

This racial distinctiveness finds its cultural expression in “the composite voice of the Negro—speech, song, laughter” (314). More than the presence and attitude of black people in the midst of a hostile society, black artistic production epitomizes the idea of a resistance to the process of normalization which characterizes western civilization. People of African descent have to find an original voice if they hope to subsist in the confines of a heartless capitalist world. In order to counter the effects of standardization, Ray insists on the heterogeneity of the means of representation which can give birth to this dissident aesthetic. Narration—brought about in written prose or through orality—, poetry, music, and even humor, are seen as expressive resources which can express the common experience uniting black people around the world. The diversity of forms and contents are only diasporic metamorphoses of the same particular character. In chapter 9, the narrator gives an example of the interchangeability of black art forms when he describes “the ‘beguin,’ which was just a Martinique variant of the ‘jelly-roll’ or the Jamaican ‘burru’ or the Senegalese ‘bombé’” (105). The multiplicity of denominations only suggests the geographical dispersion of a common culture which has progressively evolved towards different local reconfigurations. It is through a reconnection to the racial cultural roots that people of African descent would be able to know themselves and to create a distinctive voice, thus ensuring the viability of their race in the modern world.

In the chapters entitled “Story Telling,” “Jelly Roll” and “Telling Jokes,” McKay proposes a model of cultural interchanges. The characters, white and black, exchange stories, enjoy listening to jazz music, and laugh at the same pleasantry. Ray believes that culture can bring men together; it should be the foundation of society. He emphasizes the founding principle of his vision: “happiness [is] the highest good, and difference the greatest charm, of life” (325). Diversity should be at the heart of social life. In an ideal world, Ray could create without worrying about what his audience may think: “I won’t worry about the differences in

complexion of those who listen and those who don't, I'll just identify myself with those who are really listening and tell my story" (115). This statement obviously constitutes an intertextual reference to Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." It positively asserts the possibility of intercultural and interracial dialogue at the same time as it suggests the existence of differing tastes and opinions. McKay sketches the outline of a society where difference is not a cause of division, but rather a mutual enrichment founded on the principles of respect and tolerance.

At the end of the novel, however, Ray proposes a more pessimistic view: "the hand of progress was robbing his people of many primitive and beautiful qualities. He could not see where they would find greater happiness under the weight of the machine even if progress became left-handed" (325). In addition to the implied critique of left-wing politics, this observation casts a shadow on the prospective transformation of society through a recognition of cultural diversity. The destructive processes set in motion by the capitalist system, concealed behind the euphemistic word of 'progress,' threatens the black race. The dehumanizing forces of the 'white man's world' imperil black people's integrity. The only means of salvation lies in Ray's exhortation: "Getting down to our native roots and building up from our own people . . . is not savagery. It is culture" (208). McKay believes that the only response to the menace embodied in the capitalist principles is a cultural approach, based on a racial background. His viewpoint is a message that Césaire, Senghor, and Damas would remember when outlining the early theory of Négritude.

McKay openly attacks western society in *Banjo*. France, usually represented as a land of freedom and tolerance, does not escape his incriminating diagnosis. In his analysis of the novel, in *From Harlem to Paris*, Fabre claims that "McKay's criticism of French ways must be interpreted as a refusal to exonerate France from being part of Western civilization, which had done so much to dehumanize the colored world" (108). The inclusion of France in the

‘white man’s world’ is probably one of the elements which explicates the success of the novel among French black intellectuals. However, *Banjo* is not only a strident critique directed towards the western world. It also proposes an alternative model of society and puts forward a program for change. Based on the rejection of conventional modes of affiliation and the affirmation of a racially-defined identity, it challenges the hegemonic capitalist discourse and celebrates the notion of cultural difference. Nickels describes McKay’s attitude as ‘dissident internationalism’ and explains that “the dream [he] articulates . . . is one in which portable rituals of racial self-development take the place of parties and territorially based nationalisms” (30). By the end of the novel, Ray and Banjo confirm their abandonment of political and national allegiances and their adoption of a cosmopolitan outlook by choosing to lead a nomadic life. The traditional detour through Europe results in a dismissal of territorialized and politicized identifications, and leads to an adherence to a racialized conception of black identity. It is the vision which the founders of Négritude will develop through another detour during the 1930s.

## Chapter 5

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### The African American Detour of Early Négritude: from *Légitime Défense* to Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*

In “La Poésie négro-américaine” (1950), Senghor claims that “Claude MacKay [sic] peut être considéré, à bon droit, comme le véritable inventeur de la *Négritude*” (116).<sup>290</sup> Assigning the fatherhood of the concept to the author of *Banjo*, he suggests that Négritude implicitly existed in McKay’s texts before the French intellectuals discovered, appropriated, and developed it. In this statement, Senghor clearly situates the appearance of the concept in a transnational paradigm. He reaffirms, following the genealogy that Paulette Nardal proposed in “Awakening of Race Consciousness,” the privileged relationship which connects the French and the American black communities. The birth of Négritude, he claims, is the result of the contacts and interchanges taking place between the two groups. *Banjo* indeed had a great impact on the French black students living in the capital at the time and the founders of Négritude seem to agree on its importance.<sup>291</sup> Along with other African American literary works, it helped them develop their own perspectives on race and racial emancipation and shaped the ideas which would become the fundamental elements of their cultural movement.

Négritude has often been interpreted as an assertion of black identity negotiated through the rediscovery of African cultural values. The affirmation of blackness and the rejection of assimilation were the two original cornerstones on which the movement would be built. In *Decolonizing the Text* (1995), Debra L. Anderson synthesizes it as “a symbolic and

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<sup>290</sup> “Claude McKay can rightly be considered the true inventor of Négritude.”

<sup>291</sup> In a 1967 interview with René Depestre, Césaire clarifies that “McKay’s novel, *Banjo* . . . was really one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity” (71). This statement would be echoed by Damas during his conversation with Ikonné in August 1975: “We read it and saw that *Banjo* was wonderful. Why? Because all the same it had chosen Marseilles; it had chosen the black-French problem which concerned us in particular. And it had clearly understood our problems” (309) – The interview is reproduced in *Links and Bridges* in Appendix A (in French) and B (in English).

cultural return to Africa” (27). The use of Glissant’s terminology in the definition articulates it as the consecration of a permanent African culture. However, for the Négritude writers, the relation to the ancestral continent, far from consisting in a sterile gesture towards immutability, implied a dynamic reassessment of black civilizational values. It entailed a reconnection to black cultural traditions and a rediscovery of African history. The process would help black subjects to construct and reinforce a sense of identity, and to find a place in modern society. The positive reassessment of the African past, which would prompt a constructive affirmation of the self, had, however, to be mediated. Like African American artists a decade earlier, the protagonists of Négritude had to face the dispossession resulting from the rupture of slavery. Whereas, in *The New Negro*, Locke attempted to overcome this breach through a European detour, French black intellectuals would turn to the African American community in search of a connection with the place of origin.

This chapter explores the trajectories which allowed Négritude writers to define a distinctive African personality and to escape the dominating sphere of French culture. The inspiration drawn from black American poets such as McKay, Hughes, or Sterling A. Brown enabled the founders of Négritude to resist the sterile imitation of French literature brought forth by assimilation, and to find their own distinctive voice through a new poetic idiom in French. To look at the emergence of Négritude in relation to black America leads to a reconsideration of the relation between the Harlem Renaissance and the Paris-based movement. Although the influence of African Americans on the birth of Négritude has been asserted by many scholars, specific intertextual connections have seldom been pointed out.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> The most frequent examples quoted is Léro’s reference to Hughes and McKay in “Misère d’une poésie,” and the quotation excerpted from *Banjo*, which both appeared in *Légitime Défense*. Edwards and Thomas A. Hale have also explored Césaire’s interest for Brown’s poetry. Apart from these two direct intertextual references, the link between the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude is almost never explicitly exemplified. For the link with *Légitime Défense*, see, among many others, Steins, “Brown France vs. Black Africa” 491-93; Feuser, 295-95; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* 197-98; Ikonné, *Links and Bridges* 145-46; Kesteloot, *Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française* 63 – for Césaire’s interest in Brown, see Edwards, “Aimé Césaire and the Syntax of Influence” (2005) and Hale, “Césaire and the Challenge of Translation” (2013).

Moreover, the vast majority of the studies, which attempt to explain the origin of Négritude and which mention the importance of the Harlem Renaissance as an antecedent only operate within a black diasporic paradigm. They focus on direct transatlantic contacts between black communities—correspondence, periodicals, and so on—and do not question the other channels through which Harlem Renaissance texts arrived in France and were discovered by the black students living in the French capital.<sup>293</sup> This chapter intends to address these shortcomings by proposing an overview of the black American texts which were available to the founders of Négritude and by tracing the African American presence underlying the early texts of the Francophone movement.

The lack of intertextual analysis in the scholarship on the relation between the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement partly stems from the approach inaugurated by Lilyan Kesteloot in her seminal work, *Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française* (1963). The principal conclusions of the book are based on interviews. During her doctoral research, she met with no less than twenty-five authors. The discussions she had with Maran, Senghor, Césaire, and Damas particularly inform her argument.<sup>294</sup> To rely on statements drawn from personal memories and interpretative comments seems to have become an important methodological approach in the studies focused on the connection between the American and the French communities during the interwar period. However, it is erroneous to believe that the founders of Négritude were always unanimous with regards to the impact of African American writers on their early works. The contradictory statements, which they made over

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<sup>293</sup> Fabre's "Oubliés par la NRF?" (2008) and Kernan's *Lost and Found in Black Translation* (2007) offer partial answers to the ways in which African American literary works travelled across the Atlantic and were interpreted through the selection and translation of specific texts.

<sup>294</sup> She also refers to interviews with Suzanne Césaire, Jacques Rabemananjara, Paul Nizer, Alioune Diop, Michel Leiris, and André Breton. The last part of the book, "Situation actuelle des écrivains noirs"—"Present situation of black writers," is a survey of black literature in French in the 1960s based on interviews of contemporary black authors.

time, unavoidably caused confusion.<sup>295</sup> It is important to keep in mind that their comments were also inevitably inflected by contemporary events. The interpretations they proposed could not escape taking into account the development of race relations and the evolution of the colonial situation as it unfolded in the decades following World War II. Senghor, Césaire, and Damas would necessarily attempt to offer explanations to the changes taking place around them. Their accounts of Négritude were shaped by their willingness to provide answers to the questions raised by historical circumstances. The significance of the concept consequently shifted over time and the later statements made by Césaire, Senghor, and Damas do not allow for a good understanding of the birth of the movement. An approach emphasizing intertextuality seems more relevant to explain the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the emergence and early development of the concept in the 1930s.

The literary history of Négritude has often been presented as a teleological narrative unavoidably leading to decolonization. It would be erroneous to minimize the importance of the concept for anti-colonial struggles. It can be useful, however, to make a distinction between early Négritude, which encompasses all the texts produced before World War II, and the development of the movement during the post-war period, which was indeed connected to the fight against colonial oppression and the era of independences.<sup>296</sup> Before World War II, Négritude was principally a reaction against assimilation, understood as a colonial policy. It

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<sup>295</sup> See, for example, for Césaire, Depestres, 72 and Charles H. Rowell, “It Is through Poetry” (51); for Damas, Ikonné, *Links and Bridges* 309 and 312. Throughout the years, Senghor seems to have been the more coherent of the three Négritude founders – see Senghor, “Problématique de la Négritude,” 10-16; *La Poésie de l’action* (1980); see also Cook, “Some Literary Contacts,” 121-22.

<sup>296</sup> In *The French Imperial Nation-State*, Wilder hints at the different perspectives which separate pre- and post-war Négritude: “Negritude writing before 1945 entailed gestures of colonial critique and exercises in political imagination that would later become submerged in the era of Bandung and decolonization, when Negritude became an internationally recognized movement” (254). However, he does not clearly distinguish the two phases in the rest of the book. Although, as the work’s subtitle suggests, the study aims at exploring Negritude and colonial humanism during the interwar period, it sometimes uses works such as Césaire’s “Poésie et connaissance,” published in *Tropiques* in 1945, or his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, published in 1955, to explain the Négritude of the 1930s. Replaced in the perspective of *Freedom Time* (2015), these occasional slippages do not, however, betray Wilder’s overall understanding of Négritude.

was a cultural liberation which did not necessarily imply political autonomy. It was a form of resistance whose purpose was to gain intellectual freedom through the rehabilitation of the values which had informed African civilization. This would in turn allow black people to earn a place at the heart of a world culture understood in terms of universality. To observe the movement only through an anti-colonial lens, or to present it as a prelude to decolonization, can be reductive and does not take into account the initial impulses which led to the creation of the concept. Although it emerged as a reaction to the colonial situation, it did not initially insist on the necessity to overthrow the system and reject all the affiliations with the metropole.

This chapter aims at interpreting the Négritude movement in the pre-war context by underlining the important role that African Americans played during the formative years of the movement. Starting from the publication of *Légitime Défense* in 1932, it extends its reach until the 1939 version of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. With the exception of one text—"Introduction à la poésie nègre américaine," published in 1941 in *Tropiques*, the essays and poems under consideration in this chapter belong to the pre-war era. In *The French Imperial Nation-State*, Wilder summarizes Négritude as it was constructed during the late 1930s: "a particularist theory of 'Negro-African' identity articulated with an antiracist universal humanism" (204).<sup>297</sup> Although he acknowledges the importance of the New Negro movement in the formation of the concept, Wilder does not explicitly connect the creation of this 'particularist theory' to the impact of black Americans on the French black community. I contend that the contacts with the African American writers, and even more the reading of their artistic production, constituted the decisive elements which led to the creation of the

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<sup>297</sup> In a similar vein, Steins summarily defines Négritude, in "Brown France vs. Black Africa," as "the concept of a pan-Negro cultural identity" (476).

Négritude concept.<sup>298</sup> This chapter demonstrates that black America functioned for Césaire, Senghor, and Damas, as a Glissantian detour. It oriented their attention away from political activism and toward the rediscovery of African cultural traditions. This process allowed them to free themselves from the direct influence of French literary traditions; it helped them find a poetic voice of their own. The texts produced by Harlem Renaissance writers triggered a reaction of self-consciousness and racial pride among the black students in Paris that would result in the birth of Négritude.

### **The Harlem Renaissance Crosses the Atlantic: African American texts in France**

Before tracing African American influence in the emergence of the Francophone movement, it is necessary to present an overview of the texts that were available to the its founders and to articulate the ways in which they were received and interpreted in France in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Harlem Renaissance reached black French writers through different mediums and formats. In the first place, some African American novels were translated into French. The Parisian public could thus discover Walter White's *L'Étincelle* (1928), Hughes's *Sandy* (1934), and Rudolph Fisher's *La mort du sorcier* (1936).<sup>299</sup> McKay's novels, *Banjo*, *Home to Harlem*, and *Banana Bottom* (1933) were respectively translated in 1931, 1932, and 1934.<sup>300</sup> In addition, poems—translated or not—were published in French periodicals. The black newspapers, which we analyzed in the third chapter of the thesis, were not the only journals which showed interest in African American literary productions. *La Revue politique et littéraire*, *Europe*, *Nouvel Âge*, among others,

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<sup>298</sup> This does not mean that I disregard the importance of French literary models and the essential role that ethnology and anthropology played in the formation of Négritude. The concept of Négritude evidently stemmed from a multiplicity of sources, as Césaire, Senghor, and Damas found inspiration in the intellectual environment of the Parisian cultural life.

<sup>299</sup> Translations of White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932).

<sup>300</sup> *Home to Harlem* was rendered as *Quartier Noir*. The other titles remained unaltered.

inserted black American verses in their columns. Other periodicals, such as *La Revue de Paris*, *Candide*, and *Les Nouvelles littéraires* featured articles on the American black renaissance.<sup>301</sup> Finally, French black intellectuals had also access to some works, such as Locke's *The New Negro*, Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* (1932), and perhaps Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, in the original.<sup>302</sup> All of these texts were circulated and discussed among the black circles of Paris.

Two authors seem in particular to have drawn the attention of French black intellectuals: Claude McKay and Langston Hughes. The French version of *Banjo*, published in 1932, played an essential role in the early formulation of Négritude. The context of its appearance clearly demonstrates that McKay's prose had caught the attention of the French Left. The publisher, Les Editions Rieder, was famous for giving preference to socialist and communist writers. Left-wing personalities, such as Jean-Richard Bloch, Albert Crémieux, Léon Bazalgette, among others, were part of the editorial board.<sup>303</sup> In 1923, they launched *Europe*, a literary magazine that would publish authors such as Tristan Tzara and Paul Nizan.<sup>304</sup> In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards remarks that the translators of *Banjo*, Paul-Vaillant Couturier and his wife, Ida Treat, were connected to the French Communist Party (196). The author of the preface, Georges Friedmann, was also committed to leftist politics. Introducing the novel and its author to the French public, he defined the potential readers as "ceux pour qui n'est pas un vain mot l'appel de ce siècle vers un humanisme révolutionnaire

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<sup>301</sup> It has to be noted at this point that the French black community had access to the African American press as well. There is plenty of evidence that journals such as the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *The Negro World* were read in Parisian black circles – for an overview of the articles on the Harlem Renaissance published in France, see, Fabre, "Oublié par la NRF?" (2008).

<sup>302</sup> As we will see later in the chapter, we can sometimes infer that black intellectuals had access to certain works. Maran had a copy of Locke's *The New Negro* and it is more than probable that he shared it with the students which met at his literary salon. Edward A. Jones gave a copy of *Southern Road* to Césaire in 1935 – see Maran, Letter to Locke, 15 Oct. 1927; Jones, "Afro-French Writers of the 1930s" (1970) and *Voices of Négritude* (1971).

<sup>303</sup> See Maria Chiara Gnocchi, *Le Parti pris des périphéries* (2007), chap. 2-3.

<sup>304</sup> See Gnocchi, 102-105.

et constructif” (24).<sup>305</sup> His interpretation also emphasized the socio-political dimension of the text:

Il faut songer qu’aux Etats-Unis, pour tout intellectuel noir atteint par le succès et la considération des blancs, se pose vis-à-vis de son peuple un problème moral qui n’est pas essentiellement différent de celui d’un écrivain d’origine prolétarienne, en société bourgeoise. Ou plutôt, là-bas, le problème est double, puisque la pente de son succès peut l’engager à la fois loin de sa classe et de sa race (13).<sup>306</sup>

This statement subtly underlines the two orientations that Friedmann sees in McKay’s text.

The question of the working class is prominent in *Banjo*. Although the final conclusion of the novel moves towards an explicit rejection of the class struggle in order to adopt the notion of race as unique marker of identity, Friedmann frames *Banjo* as a text sympathetic to left-wing politics at the same time as he underlines the main characters’ commitment to race.

Whereas his presentation of McKay’s life stresses his involvement with left-wing circles, notably at *The Workers’ Dreadnought* in London and at *The Liberator* in New York, he insists on the alleged primitive qualities which characterize the protagonists of the novel. He describes ‘the black man’ as “l’homme, parmi les races de cette planète, le plus près des instincts, de la terre, des forces cosmiques, l’être émotif et musical par excellence, essentiellement étranger aux abstractions et aux catégories de notre logique” (22).<sup>307</sup> The singular form which appears throughout the passage emphasizes the essentialist vision underlying the statement. Friedmann’s choice of words indicates that he adopts a vision of the black race widely established at the time. Asserting the “spiritual endowment” of black people, to use Locke’s expression in “Negro Youth Speaks,” the type of affirmations which

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<sup>305</sup> “Those to whom the call of the century towards a revolutionary and constructive humanism is not an empty word” – this statement is in total accordance with the vision that Les Editions Rieder defended as their publishing policy. See Gnocchi, 168-71.

<sup>306</sup> “One has to think that in the United States, a moral problem, which is not essentially different from the one of a writer from proletarian origin in a bourgeois society, comes up vis-à-vis his people for every black intellectual touched by success and white consideration. Or rather, over there, the problem is double, since the slope of success can lead him away from his class and his race altogether.”

<sup>307</sup> “The man, among the races of this planet, closest to instincts, earth, cosmic forces, the emotional and musical being par excellence, essentially a stranger to the abstractions and categories of our logic.”

punctuate the preface of *Banjo*'s French edition recalls essays presented in *The New Negro*—such as Barnes's "Negro Art and America," or Rogers's "Jazz at Home"—and situates Friedmann's text in a primitivist line of interpretation. The difference from the American context stems from the coupling of this kind of rhetoric with a concern for the masses. Primitivism not only announces the salvation of western civilization, it heralds its redemption through a leftist-inspired regeneration. The allegedly primitive qualities of the black race augur revolutionary social changes.

These two axes of interpretation also determined the reception of Hughes in France during the same period. Three main publications allowed French readers to familiarize themselves with the African American poet's verses. On 20 June 1929, *La Revue politique et littéraire* published an article written by Franck L. Schoell and accompanied by quotations and translations of Hughes's poems.<sup>308</sup> A line of "The Weary Blues" is cited in English in order to illustrate the jazz style of the American poet's verses. "Nude Young Dancer," and "Summer Night" are partially reproduced in translation. The article also features a French version of "Cabaret," "Songs to the Black Virgin," "Lament for Dark Peoples," "Afraid," "I, Too," and "Mother to Son." With the exception of the last one, all the poems proposed by Schoell are included in Hughes's first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926. "Mother to Son" appeared in December 1922 in the *Crisis* and in the collection entitled *Four Negro Poets*, edited by Locke in 1927. A letter to Du Bois, dated from 28 November 1927, suggests that Schoell did not receive the *Crisis* in the early 1920s and indicates therefore that he probably discovered the poem in Locke's collection.

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<sup>308</sup> The article is titled "Un Poète nègre: Langston Hughes." In January of the same year, Schoell had published in *La Revue de Paris* an extensive article entitled "La 'Renaissance nègre' aux Etats-Unis." It is difficult to trace the career of this university teacher. Before World War I, he is professor of French and literature at the University of Chicago. He returns to France during the war. In 1923, he publishes *La Question des noirs aux Etats-Unis*, with a preface by Maurice Delafosse. On 10 June 1924, he sends a letter to Alain Locke—in French—in which he explains that he leaves the head of the department of Romance Languages at Tulane University for a position at the University of California. His letter to Du Bois on 28 November 1927 indicates that he works in Geneva as Director of Publications for the League of Nations.

In December 1931, in Henry Poulaille's leftist review, *Nouvel âge*, Léone Louis proposes a translation of eleven poems composed by Hughes, preceded by a short presentation of the author. The selection presented in these pages is comprised of "Call to Creation," "Poem"—subtitled "For the portrait of an African boy after the manner of Gauguin," "Danse africaine," "Disillusion," "Afraid," "A Black Pierrot," "Dream Variations," "Tired," "Songs to the Dark Virgin," "Beggar Boy," and "I, Too." The last poem is introduced as "Epilogue," which is the title it bears in *The Weary Blues*. Louis probably worked with Hughes's collection: the presentation of the poet's life is heavily indebted to Van Vechten's introduction to the work.<sup>309</sup> Finally, the March 1932 issue of *Europe* offered a translation of the famous "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" which appeared in *New Masses* in December 1931. This overview allows us to see that at least sixteen of Hughes's poems were available in translation at the beginning of the 1930s in Paris. It also hints at the probable circulation of works such as *The New Negro*, *Four Negro Poets*, and *The Weary Blues* among the Parisian intellectual circles.

Louis's presentation and translation of Hughes's poems had a particular impact on the black community of students and intellectuals who lived in Paris at the time. The article begins with a preamble on the situation of black people in the United States. Louis stresses the paradox between the white people's enthusiastic interest for African American literary production and the existence and continuation of segregationist practices. He concludes, quoting "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," that black artists do not attach too much importance to the whims of white audiences, but mainly strive after the recognition of their black peers: "Nous, créateurs de la nouvelle génération nègre, nous voulons exprimer notre

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<sup>309</sup> This remark is even truer for Schoell's account of the young poet's career in "Un Poète nègre." However, the choice to present the poem under the title "Moi aussi"—"I, Too"—proves that Schoell had also access either to the *Survey Graphic* issue on Harlem or to *The New Negro*. His article, entitled "La 'Renaissance Nègre' aux Etats-Unis," published in *La Revue de Paris*, shows that he was certainly in possession of Locke's anthology.

personnalité noire sans honte ni crainte. Si cela plait aux blancs, nous en sommes fort heureux. Si cela ne leur plaît pas, peu importe” (1060).<sup>310</sup> The translation subtly modifies Hughes’s text. The group designated as the ‘younger Negro artists’ becomes ‘la nouvelle génération nègre’—‘the new negro generation,’ thus emphasizing its novelty and implying innovation and originality.<sup>311</sup> The most important change, however, concerns the source of the black artist’s art. Hughes’s version insists on the personal dimension of the artistic endeavor: it is the ‘*individual* dark-skinned selves’ that the writers seek to express.<sup>312</sup> The French version mentions a ‘black personality’—‘notre personnalité noire’—in the singular. Instead of insisting on multiple black subjectivities, as the original text does, it presupposes the existence of a homogeneous character which would define people of African descent. This modification of the text reorients its meaning towards a particularistic understanding of the race. Louis confirms her conception a few paragraphs later when she describes Hughes’s poetry: “c’est l’expression libre et spontanée de l’âme noire avec tout ce qu’elle comporte de chaud, de vibrant et de passionné” (1061).<sup>313</sup> This statement unequivocally connects her interpretation to a primitivist discourse.

Ryan J. Kernan remarks in his doctoral thesis that the choice of the poems presented in *Nouvel âge* reinforces this stance.<sup>314</sup> The selection indeed displays images of an atavistic Africa; it resounds with the beat of tom-toms and emphasizes black people’s unaltered bond

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<sup>310</sup> “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter” (Hughes, “Racial Mountain,” 694).

<sup>311</sup> There is no reference to Locke’s *The New Negro* here. The order of the French words—‘nouvelle génération nègre’—prevents such an association of ideas. The literal transposition into English—‘new negro generation’—involuntarily hints at a connection absent from the French text. I chose to write ‘negro’ without a capital letter here in order to show that there is no allusion to Locke’s work.

<sup>312</sup> My italics.

<sup>313</sup> “It is the free and spontaneous expression of the Negro soul with all it involve of warm, vibrant, and passionate”

<sup>314</sup> Kernan convincingly argues that, in the translation of “Disillusion,” the rendering of the English word ‘simple’ as ‘primitif’ also illustrates Louis’s choice to present Hughes through a primitivist discourse – see Kernan, 196-203.

with nature, or their alienation in the middle of western civilization. Commenting on the “poèmes nostalgiques dédiés à ‘son’ Afrique lointaine et romantique,” Louis remarks that “cette Afrique, Langston Hughes en reproduit l’atmosphère et le rythme dans sa poésie” (1061).<sup>315</sup> In “Un Poète nègre,” Schoell also insisted on the importance of the ancestral continent in Hughes’s verses: “[il] a vu ses frères de couleur dans leur Afrique natal, dans l’Afrique de ses pères. Aussi sa tristesse et sa nostalgie foncières, ne sachant où se poser, le reportent-elles souvent vers la jungle africaine” (437).<sup>316</sup> Represented in these articles as the motherland, as the native land of his race brothers, or as the land of the ancestors, Africa embodies the nostalgia that allegedly characterizes Hughes’s poetic creations. Thrown in the middle of an industrial civilization, the poet spontaneously turns back to the atavistic land which he describes in his verses.<sup>317</sup> Primitivism thus becomes an aesthetic posture which situates the poet in contradistinction with occidental principles and values.

The image of the beggar boy, playing on his flute “un air sauvage et libre,” illustrates the spirit of defiance which Louis perceives in Hughes’s poetry (1064).<sup>318</sup> Two poems display a particularly rebellious tone: “Appel à une création nouvelle” and “Fatigue” (1062 and 1063).<sup>319</sup> Whereas all the other poems presented in the selection were excerpted from *The Weary Blues*, these two compositions were excerpted from the *New Masses* issue of February 1931 which preceded their publication in French in *Nouvel âge* only by a few months.<sup>320</sup> In

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<sup>315</sup> “nostalgic poems dedicated to ‘his’ Africa, remote and romantic” – “Langston Hughes recreates the atmosphere and the rhythm of this Africa in his poetry”

<sup>316</sup> “[He] saw his colored brothers in their native Africa, in the Africa of his fathers. Thus, his innate sadness and nostalgia, not knowing where to set down, often bring him to the African jungle.”

<sup>317</sup> Damas would reproduce the same argument in *Retour de Guyane* (1937) when he claims that Hughes “retrouvait spontanément une veine poétique originelle, et parvenait même à plier l’instrument rigide et précis de l’Anglais à une plainte d’une subtilité dans la raillerie essentiellement africaine” (128) – “[Hughes] found an original poetic vein and managed to inflect the rigid and precise instrument of the English language to a complaint that displayed an essentially African subtlety in its irony.”

<sup>318</sup> “A wild free tune” (Hughes, *CP*, 29).

<sup>319</sup> Translation of Hughes’s “Call to Creation” and “Tired” (*CP* 135).

<sup>320</sup> The selection presented in *New Masses* featured “To Certain Negro Leaders” and “A Christian Country” in addition to the two poems quoted here (*CP* 136).

her introductory article, Louis underlines the themes which characterize such verses: “révolte en face de la méchanceté et de la cruauté, sentiment de la tragédie de sa race” (1061).<sup>321</sup> The frustration of the speaker is especially palpable in “Fatigue”: weary of waiting for change, he symbolically proposes to open the world in two with a knife “pour voir quels vers en rongent / la croûte” (1063).<sup>322</sup> This cry of revolt is paralleled with an invitation to respond to oppression through artistic production. In “Appel à une création nouvelle,” the poet enjoins the “créateurs de beauté” to renounce beauty and turn to misery and suffering instead.<sup>323</sup> The translation of the poem’s title significantly adds the adjective ‘nouvelle’—‘new’—to the original heading. The idea of renewal, already suggested in the article when Louis translated “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” to introduce the ‘new generation’ of black artists—instead of ‘young Negro artists,’ finds here its clearest expression. Hughes proposes, in this poem, an abandonment of traditional poetic subjects in order to create a poetry which takes into account the contemporaneous social reality. The emphasis on this creation’s novelty, in the French version, reinforces the call’s urgency and underlines the radical cultural transformation which has to take place. The black Parisian intellectuals who brought about the emergence of the Négritude movement would reply to the call.

### **The Formulation of Négritude: *Légitime Défense*, *L’Etudiant Noir*, and African American Models**

The first formulation of the ideas that immediately laid the foundation of Négritude was not primarily a cultural affirmation. *Légitime Défense* was indeed a cry of revolt. In *Race, Culture, and Identity*, Lewis argues that the content of the journal was grounded in an idea of

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<sup>321</sup> “Revolt in front of the meanness and the cruelty, feeling of his race’s tragedy” – Although in the article Louis astonishingly chose a passage from “I, Too” to illustrate these poetic moods, her statement probably refers to “Appel à une création nouvelle” and “Fatigue” as well.

<sup>322</sup> “And see what worms are eating / At the rind” (*CP* 135).

<sup>323</sup> “beauty-makers” (*CP* 135).

“the primacy of politics over culture” (9).<sup>324</sup> The opening manifesto mainly consists in a collective declaration of political convictions.<sup>325</sup> Pledging allegiance to the Third International, the authors incriminate the society in which they live: “nous nous dressons ici contre tous ceux qui ne sont pas suffoqués par ce monde capitaliste, chrétien, bourgeois dont à notre corps défendant nous faisons partie” (1).<sup>326</sup> This feeling of asphyxia prompts an urgent need for active resistance. *Légitime Défense* is the result of this drive to move into action. The first and only issue of the journal gives priority to the condemnation of the politics of assimilation which plagues the French Antilles.<sup>327</sup> In *Les Ecrivains noirs de langue française*, Kesteloot, who articulates *Légitime Défense* as the immediate antecedent of the black renaissance in France, remarks that these young people “se reconnaissent—malgré leur éducation—différents des Européens, auxquels leurs pères souhaitaient tant s’assimiler” (25).<sup>328</sup> The process of differentiation begins with a severe critique of the former generations of Antilleans who ambioned integration.

In his article, which immediately follows the introductory manifesto, Jules-Marcel Monnerot imagines, not without humor, a documentary illustrating the emergence of the French black bourgeoisie. With the help of cinematographic special effects, the audience would witness the transformation of a black slave into a “bourgeois coloré, distingué et salueur à qui dans l’inappréciable intervalle de deux images auraient poussé un complet

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<sup>324</sup> The terms ‘politics’ and ‘culture’ have to be understood as possible courses of action. A political approach would give priority to the defense of civil rights and social positions on a legislative level whereas the insistence on ‘culture’ advocates artistic production as a primary means towards emancipation. The two programs were obviously never totally distinct. It is rather a question of priority of one strategy over the other.

<sup>325</sup> In the bibliography, this text appears under Léro, Etienne, et al. and is categorized as ‘Editorial,’ although it does not bear any title in *Légitime Défense*.

<sup>326</sup> “We rise here against those who are not suffocated by this capitalist, Christian, bourgeois world to which we belong against our will.”

<sup>327</sup> Aware of the accusing tone of the journal, the contributors left the task of formulating resolutions and proposing solutions for future issues which, unfortunately, would never come into being – see footnote on page 1 of *Légitime Défense*.

<sup>328</sup> “These young people realize that, despite their education, they are different from the Europeans with whom their fathers tried so hard to be assimilated” (Kesteloot, *Black Writers in French*, 15).

veston et un chapeau melon” (3).<sup>329</sup> The three-piece suit and the bowler hat become symbols of integration, but hide behind a westernized appearance an attitude of servility.<sup>330</sup> The imitation of French manners and customs is presented as a form of alienation. René Ménéil, in his contribution, notes that “progressivement, l’Antillais de couleur renie sa race, son corps, ses passions fondamentales et particulières, sa façon spécifique de réagir à l’amour et à la mort” (7).<sup>331</sup> The form of denial resulting from the desire to be integrated into the dominant group not only endangers the life of the individual, who alienates himself from his body, but also threatens the cultural integrity of the collectivity. Assimilation is presented as an act of betrayal against the race which leads people of African descent to negate their racial identity and repudiate their culture. Ménéil deplores that the poetry written by Martinicans is nothing more than a pale imitation of French versification. In “Misère d’une poésie,” Etienne Léro similarly ascribes the poor quality of the poetic production in Martinique to the servile emulation of obsolete French models. Antillean poets miss the opportunity to explore racial themes and, as a consequence, only create tiresome verses: “l’étranger chercherait vainement dans cette littérature un accent original ou profond, l’imagination sensuelle et colorée du noir, l’écho des haines et des aspirations d’un peuple opprimé” (10).<sup>332</sup> In order to circumvent “l’obsession de l’imitation,” that Glissant describes in *Le Discours antillais* (47), Caribbean

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<sup>329</sup> A “colored bourgeois, distinguished and courteous, to whom, in the immeasurable interval of two images, a three-piece suit and a bowler hat would have grown.”

<sup>330</sup> Although this attire would unmistakably evoke the idea of minstrelsy in an American context, it does not seem to be connected to this type of conventions in *Légitime Défense*. Clothing was an important aspect of black emancipation in France, as well as in the United States. A survey on the question of sartorial choices appeared in *La Revue du Monde Noir*. At the end of the second issue, readers were asked to reply to the following question: “How should Negroes living in Europe, dress?” (60). The next two numbers displayed several answers – see in *La Revue du Monde Noir*, “Nos Enquêtes” (Dec. 1931); Louis Thomas Achille, “Nos Enquêtes” (Jan. 1932); and “Notre Enquête” (Feb. 1932). See also, about the question of sartorial self-presentation, Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’* (1998); Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion* (2009); and Abernethy, “The Beauty of Other Horizons” (2014).

<sup>331</sup> “Progressively, the colored Antillean renounces his race, his body, his fundamental and particular passions, his specific way of reacting to love and to death.”

<sup>332</sup> “The foreigner would search in vain in this literature for an original or profound accent, the sensual and colorful imagination of the black man, the echo of an oppressed people’s hatred and aspirations.”

writers urgently need to seek inspiration elsewhere.<sup>333</sup> In other words, and to use Glissant's term, they have to find a detour.

Although, as Shireen K. Lewis has noted, Ménil and Léro suggest Haitian and Soviet poets as models, the contributors of *Légitime Défense* principally turn their eyes to the United States in search of writers to emulate (18). In order to illustrate the poverty of black people in Martinique, Maurice-Sabas Quitman, in his article on illiteracy, quotes Hughes's "Le petit mendiant," borrowed from Louis's selection, published in *Nouvel âge* (5). In "Généralités sur 'l'écrivain' de couleur antillais," Ménil refers to jazz and African American poetry as sources of inspiration for black writers in their quest for authenticity (8-9). However, it is Léro who celebrates the possible renewal of the Antillean poetry through African American influence in the most enthusiastic terms: "Le vent qui monte de l'Amérique noire aura vite fait, espérons-le, de nettoyer nos Antilles des fruits avortés d'une culture caduque. Langston Hughes and Claude Mac-Kay [sic], les deux poètes noirs révolutionnaires, nous ont apportés, marinés dans l'alcool rouge, l'amour africain de la vie, la joie africaine de l'amour, le rêve africain de la mort" (12).<sup>334</sup> The insistence on Africa seems to prolong the primitivist stance of Louis's and Schoell's articles. The argument even takes an anti-assimilationist dimension. The purpose is clearly to eradicate and replace French influence in Caribbean literature. In Léro's opinion, African American poetry is the pathway that leads both to Africa and to revolution. The alleged radical dimension of the African American models put forward by Léro supplements the Marxist tone of the opening manifesto. An extract from the French translation of McKay's *Banjo* further reinforces the communist resonance of the journal.

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<sup>333</sup> "The obsession with imitation" (18).

<sup>334</sup> "The wind which is rising from black America will soon, we hope, cleanse our Antilles of the aborted fruits of an outdated culture. Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, the two black revolutionary poets, have brought us, marinated in red alcohol, the African love of life, the African joy of love, the African dream of death."

Set at the beginning of chapter 16, “The Blue Cinema,” the passage relates the encounter of Ray and a student from Martinique.<sup>335</sup> After discussing *Batouala* and lecturing the young man on education and the black cultural renaissance, Ray fails to convince his interlocutor to accompany him to the African Bar, a fact which illustrates the strength of the young student’s prejudices against Africans. In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Edwards attempts to reframe this discussion as “an *intra-Caribbean* dialogue” (197)—Ray is, indeed, from Haiti. However, he does not take into account the fact that, in the article that immediately precedes the excerpt, Léro presents Haitian poets as the first Antillean artists receptive to African American influence: “déjà de jeunes poètes haïtiens nous livrent des vers gonflés d’un future dynamisme” (12).<sup>336</sup> Moreover, as we have seen in the previous chapter, McKay does not hesitate, in an undated letter to Hughes—probably written in 1927 or 1928, to call the United States home. Since Ray is probably McKay’s fictional alter-ego, we can assume that the Jamaican writer would have accepted to be introduced as African American. In the title of the excerpt presented in *Légitime Défense*, the choice to present Ray as a black American may stem from a slight confusion. It nevertheless constitutes an interpretative gesture which reinforces the determination of the journal to signal black America as an example to follow.

In addition, the passage suggests the urgent need to unify the race. Ray affirms that “vous ne pouvez pas ignorer les Sénégalais et les autres Africains noirs; pas davantage que vous ne pouvez ignorer le fait que nos ancêtres étaient des esclaves” (13).<sup>337</sup> This statement condemns the attitude of the Caribbean mulatto elite, which contemptuously ignores the black population and prefers to associate with European people. Ray—and the group of *Légitime Défense* through his voice—reminds the people from Martinique of their African origins. The

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<sup>335</sup> See, in the English version, 199-201 and, in the French version, 256-59. We have analyzed this passage in chap. 4, 154.

<sup>336</sup> “Young Haitian poets already bring forth verses inflated with a future dynamism.”

<sup>337</sup> “You can’t get away from the Senegalese and other black Africans any more than you can from the fact that our forefathers were slaves” (200).

insistence on a shared ancestry—‘*our* forefathers’—emphasizes a connection which should transcend social positions. The difference between mulattoes and black people is the consequence of a history of displacement and disenfranchisement epitomized in slavery. This common experience of oppression should constitute a unifying point of reference and link people of African descent all around the world independently of social classes.

In the context of a journal openly claiming its communist affiliations, the most salient aspect of the passage remains its expression of the necessity for black intellectuals to connect with the black masses: “C’est le prolétariat qui fournit, savez-vous, l’os, le muscle, et le sel de toute race ou de toute nation” (13-14).<sup>338</sup> For the contributors of *Légitime Défense*, the black renaissance must come from the lower classes of the black population. Black intellectuals cannot solve the race problem without a strong popular support. Echoing the preface of George Friedmann, they choose to emphasize the Marxist aspect of the novel—instead of its cosmopolitan dimension or its final commitment to the black race—without taking into account Ray’s—McKay’s—reservations about communism which appear at the end of the novel (324). To claim solidarity with the black workers allows the young students who published the journal to move away from the black bourgeoisie and its endorsement of integrative practices, and to affirm their belief in the need for an intellectual resistance that they framed as a path to proletarian revolution. In his article, Monnerot evokes in thinly veiled

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<sup>338</sup> “It’s the common people, you know, who furnish the bone and sinew and salt of any race or nation” (200). It is important at this point to reevaluate a misinterpretation that has emerged from Steins’s works and that has been repeated by Edwards, who, in *The Practice of Diaspora*, defines the semantic distortions which pervades the passage of the novel quoted in *Légitime Défense* as “dogma-adding (mis)translations” (197). According to these scholars, the French version published by Rieder misled the editors of *Légitime Défense* into interpreting *Banjo* as a text promoting left-wing ideas. In the quotation quoted above, for example, ‘the common people’ is translated as ‘le prolétariat.’ Although, at the level of the sentence, or even the paragraph, the meaning of the excerpt changes from a more or less neutral statement to a communist-inflected assertion, these mistranslations do not really reinforce the Marxist overtones of the original novel considered in its entirety. However misleading the word choice of the extract quoted in *Légitime Défense* may be, the French translation of the novel, as a whole, does not betray the general atmosphere of a text which, in spite of the final rejection of a transracial solidarity between workers, does not hide its Marxist sympathies – I couldn’t unfortunately access Steins’ doctoral thesis, “Les Antécédents et la genèse de la négritude senghorienne” (1981). His views are nonetheless presented in “Brown France vs. Black Africa,” 491-93.

terms the possibility of an insurrection: “pendant ce temps dans les campagnes, des noirs continuent à couper la canne et ne pensent pas encore à couper la tête de ceux qui ne cessent pas de les trahir” (4).<sup>339</sup> The spirit of revolt which characterizes these lines recalls the final stance of Hughes’s poem, “Tired,” translated in *Nouvel âge*: “Let us take a knife / And cut the world in two – / And see what worms are eating / At the rind” (CP 135). Unlike Maran who, in *Les Continents*, deplored the possibility of revolt, the group of students publishing *Légitime Défense* seems to be ready to partake in an open rebellion against the colonial power and the black assimilated elites.

Their violent rejection of imitation constitutes a clear dismissal of integrationist policies embodied in the notion of assimilation. The contributors of *Légitime Défense* want to express the situation of the black masses. They seem to reply to Hughes’s “Call for Creation,” in which the poet exhorts the “beauty-makers” to give up their usual subjects in order to “look at life again,” that is to say, to look at the struggle of the oppressed (CP 135). In “Généralités sur ‘l’écrivain’ de couleur antillais,” Ménil enumerates the themes that could be explored by young black writers:

Sentiment du coupeur de cannes devant l’usine implacable, sentiment de solitude du noir à travers le monde, révolte contre les injustices dont il souffre souvent dans son pays surtout, l’amour de l’amour, l’amour des rêves d’alcool, l’amour des danses inspirées, l’amour de la vie et de la joie, le refus de puissance et l’acceptation [sic] de la vie, etc., etc., voilà de quoi nos distingués écrivains ne parlent jamais et qui toucherait noirs, jaunes et blancs comme les poèmes des nègres d’Amérique touchent le monde entier (8).<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> “Meanwhile, in the country, black people continue to cut sugarcane and do not yet think to cut the heads of those who keep betraying them.”

<sup>340</sup> “The feeling of the cane picker in front of the implacable factory, feeling of loneliness of the black throughout the world, revolt against the injustices he has to suffer in his own country especially, the love of love, the love of alcohol dreams, the love of inspired dances, the love of life and joy, the refusal of power and the acceptance of life, etc., etc., here are subjects about which our distinguished writers never talk et which would touch blacks, yellows and whites as the poems of the American Negroes reach the whole world.”

This self-consciously incomplete list falls in line with the themes evoked by Louis when she described Hughes's more radical verses.<sup>341</sup> Ménil nonetheless adds a primitivist backdrop to the enumeration proposed in *Nouvel âge*. Drawing on Louis's and Schoell's interpretations, he suggests that black writers should infuse their verses with primitive feelings when he evokes black people's love and joy. It is the black artist's frustration and revolt, coupled with his proximity to the forces of life, which lead to the rejection of traditional forms of art and to the creation of, or the quest for, new means of expression.

Césaire's articles published in *L'Étudiant noir* start from the same anti-assimilationist analysis but ultimately react against the promotion of political dissidence and revolt. Published in the first issue of *L'Étudiant noir* in March 1935, "Jeunesse noire et assimilation" opens with an adapted appropriation of Monnerot's fable: "Un jour, le Nègre s'empara de la cravate du Blanc, se saisit d'un chapeau melon, s'en affubla, et partit en riant..." (3).<sup>342</sup> The fable does not refer to the appearance of a social type as it did in Monnerot's article when he described the emergence of the black bourgeois. It rather relates the journey of the black race, represented as an allegorical Negro, who tries to integrate white society only to be rejected and mocked by the white population.<sup>343</sup> Clothing once again symbolizes assimilation. Black people playfully imitate western manners without realizing that they got caught up in the game. They soon deny their history and culture and scorn those who do not seek integration at all cost. Césaire's article is a reflection about and a condemnation of assimilation. It enters into a dialogue with the concerns expounded in *Légitime Défense* and denounces a form of

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<sup>341</sup> She mentioned, as quoted earlier in this chapter, the bitterness of black experience and the anger which logically stemmed from it: "révolte en face de la méchanceté et de la cruauté, sentiment de la tragédie de sa race" (1061) - "Revolt in front of the meanness and the cruelty, feeling of his race's tragedy."

<sup>342</sup> "One day, the Negro seized the tie of the White, took hold of a bowler hat, dressed up in it, and left, laughing..."

<sup>343</sup> In *Slaves to Fashion*, Miller evokes the derogatory gaze of the white crowd on dressed-up black people (320). Although the remark concerns nineteenth-century New York, it could be applied to the French capital in the 1920s. The survey on clothing, which appeared in *La Revue du Monde Noir*, started with a quotation allegedly attributed to Bergson: "Why does the sight of a Negro dressed in European fashion provoke the laugh of the white man?" (60).

alienation which separates individuals from their true self: “Si l’assimilation n’est pas folie, c’est à coup sûr, sottise, car vouloir être assimilé, c’est oublier que nul ne peut changer de faune; c’est méconnaître ‘altérité’ qui est loi de Nature” (3).<sup>344</sup> This assertion situates racial difference in the biological realm and adds an essentialist dimension to the discourse of *Légitime Défense*. The capital letter of the word ‘Nature’ reinforces the intangibility of this reality.<sup>345</sup> The article’s main purpose, however, was not to present a scientific definition of race. The celebration of the idea of ‘alterity,’ the idea that difference does not mean inferiority, is at the heart of Césaire’s thought.

Senghor, in his contribution to the third number of *L’Etudiant noir*, in May-June 1935, also circumvents racism by emphasizing the notion of difference: “Recevoir et donner: tout est là. Infériorité ou supériorité? Je préfère dire: différence, féconde, et ici, il n’y a pas de commune mesure” (2).<sup>346</sup> In this statement, he affirms his faith in the possibility of fruitful dialogues across racial and cultural boundaries. The adjective ‘féconde’ indeed presumes the potential productiveness of such contacts. In “Le Problème culturel en A.O.F.,” a conference he gave on 10 September 1937 in Dakar, Senghor reasserts the dissimilarities which divide humanity into racial groups and clarifies further his understanding of difference: “la race est une réalité, je ne dis pas la pureté raciale. Il y a différence, qui n’est pas infériorité ni antagonisme” (13).<sup>347</sup> Aware of the debates surrounding the notion of race and the escalation of racism in Europe since the rise of fascism, he rejects the idea of racial purity at the same

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<sup>344</sup> “If assimilation is not madness, it is, for sure, stupidity, for to wish to be assimilated is to forget that one cannot change into another fauna; it is to misjudge ‘alterity’ which is a law of Nature” – the word ‘faune’ in French could also be translated as ‘species.’

<sup>345</sup> Césaire does not expand on the subject and it is difficult to grasp the exact implications of his statement. It is important to note, however, that an essentialist understanding of race was never far from the surface in early Négritude writings.

<sup>346</sup> “To receive and to give: that is all. Inferiority or superiority? I would rather say: difference, productive, and here, there is no common measure” – Senghor’s article, “Racisme? Non, mais alliance spirituelle,” is reproduced in Filostrate’s *Négritude Agonistes* (124).

<sup>347</sup> “Race is a reality; I do not say racial purity. There is a difference, which is neither inferiority nor antagonism.”

time as he insists on racial disparities as an unavoidable fact. In his mind, the acceptance of these dissimilarities, far from occasioning frictions between racial groups, would certainly unite mankind. Gary Wilder has noted in *The French Imperial Nation-State* that “Senghor presents his alternative ‘African humanism,’ grounded in a particular way of being in the world, as different from but equivalent to a European humanism that it complements by making an original contribution to a worldwide ‘civilization of the universal’” (250). The affirmation of a black specificity enables people of African descent to free themselves from the European heritage that has been imposed on them and to fully participate to the elaboration of a global culture.

Césaire similarly maintains that the definition and comprehension of the distinctive racial character of black people allow them to overcome all the difficulties they have to face, and to partake in a culture defined in terms of universality. In *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, he unequivocally rejects racial hatred and affirms his extensive love for mankind:

mon coeur, préservez-moi de toute haine  
 ne faites point de moi cet homme de haine pour qui je n’ai que haine  
 car pour me cantonner en cette unique race  
 vous savez pourtant mon amour catholique  
 vous savez que ce n’est point par haine des autres races  
 que je m’exige bêcheur de cette unique race  
 que ce que je veux  
 c’est pour la faim universelle  
 pour la soif universelle (40).<sup>348</sup>

The speaker’s election of the black race does not preclude his claim to universality. On the contrary, it is only through the affirmation of his particularism that he can achieve a universal impact. Doris L. Garraway clarifies that “for Césaire . . . blackness and universality are

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<sup>348</sup> “my heart, preserve me from all hatred / do not make me into that man of hatred for whom I feel only hatred / for sheltered as I am in this unique race / you still know my catholic love / you know that it is not from hatred of other races / that I demand of myself to be a digger for this unique race / that what I want / is for universal hunger / for universal thirst” (41) – For the citation of Césaire’s *Cahier*, I use the 1939 version of the text which was published in *Volontés* in 1939 and which has been translated and edited by A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman. In-text quotations and footnote translations are taken from this bilingual edition.

fundamental predicates of one another” (79). It is through the acceptance and the affirmation of their particular racial characteristics that black people can fully realize their human potential. The founders of Négritude reject assimilation by affirming a right to difference. The aim of Négritude is to further the cause of universal humanism by emphasizing the particularisms that form its necessary and complementary parts.<sup>349</sup>

The first step towards this goal consists in a proud affirmation of blackness. This assertion is only possible, in Césaire’s mind, through culture. He therefore insists, in “Jeunesse noire et assimilation,” on the need to create an original black voice: “*La jeunesse Noire veut agir et créer. Elle veut avoir ses poètes, ses romanciers, qui lui diront à elle, ses malheurs à elle, et ses grandeurs à elle; elle veut contribuer à la vie universelle, à l’humanisation de l’humanité; et pour cela, encore une fois, il faut se conserver ou se retrouver: c’est le primat du soi*” (3).<sup>350</sup> The intertextual resonances of this passage bring us back at the same time to *Légitime Défense*, and to Louis’s and Schoell’s articles on Langston Hughes. What Césaire adds to the discussion is the idea that, by affirming his black identity, the artist of African descent would contribute to the enrichment of the whole humanity.

In “Conscience raciale et révolution sociale,” he affirms once more his desire to reach universality through the exploration of racial particularism: “Pour nous, nous voulons exploiter nos propres valeurs, connaître nos force par personnelle expérience, creuser notre propre domaine racial, sûrs que nous sommes de rencontrer en profondeur, les sources jaillissantes de l’humain universel” (1299).<sup>351</sup> In this programmatic statement, Césaire

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<sup>349</sup> In his seminal essay, “Orphée noir” (1948), Sartre misrepresents this aspect of early Négritude. He indeed claims that the aim of the movement is the creation of a society without race (xxxix-xli).

<sup>350</sup> “*Black youth wants to act and create. It wants its poets, its novelists, who would tell it, its own misfortunes, and its own grandeur; it wants to contribute to universal life, to the humanization of humanity; and, to do that, once again, one need to preserve or rediscover oneself: it is the primacy of the self*” – italics in the original.

<sup>351</sup> “For us, we want to exploit our own values, to know our strength through personal experience, to dig our own racial domain, convinced as we are to meet, in the depth, the flowing sources of the universal human being” – the page number displayed here comes from Césaire, *Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours*.

attempts to circumvent the antinomy of the particular and the universal inherent to occidental modernity.<sup>352</sup> The first stage of this evolution consists in a reappraisal of black values, not through western methodology, but through ‘personal experience.’ What Césaire suggests is an appropriation and a renewal of the discourse on race through the creation of a specifically black idiom. The presence of possessives throughout the sentence demonstrates the necessity of inaugurating a distinctive racial perspective. The expression ‘*notre propre domaine racial*’ suggests that this task can only be undertaken by people of African descent. Césaire enjoins black people to abandon occidental frames of reference and to rediscover an innate black personality: “déchirer la mécanique identification des races, déchirer les superficielles valeurs, saisir en nous le nègre immédiat” (1299).<sup>353</sup> This redefinition of the self, which necessitates a rupture with western thought and its claim to an alleged universalism, can only be undertaken, according to Césaire, through a cultural endeavor.

The influence of *Banjo* is palpable in the Négritude project as defined by Césaire in “Conscience raciale et révolution sociale.” His declaration of intent—‘creuser notre propre domaine racial’—paraphrases Ray’s argument in the passage excerpted in *Légitime Défense*: “plonger jusqu’aux racines de notre peuple et bâtir sur notre propre fonds . . . ce n’est pas retourner à l’état sauvage. C’est la culture même” (14).<sup>354</sup> Implicitly referring to this assertion, Césaire places culture at the center of his undertaking. When he claims that black people should “planter [leur] négritude comme un bel arbre jusqu’à ce qu’il produise ses fruits les plus authentiques,” he further reinforces his allusion to McKay’s novel by advocating,

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<sup>352</sup> See, Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*, 290-91, and Garraway, “Césairean Negritude between the Particular and the Universal” (2010).

<sup>353</sup> “To tear apart the mechanical identification of the races, to tear apart superficial values, to seize in ourselves the immediate Negro.”

<sup>354</sup> “Getting down to our native roots and building up from our own people . . . is not savagery. It is culture” (200) - In 1937, in “Le Problème culturel en A.O.F.,” Senghor would conclude his talk by quoting this passage, thus signaling his agreement with Césaire’s vision of Négritude.

through the image of the tree, a reconnection with racial roots.<sup>355</sup> Césaire in fact defends a cultural program against “ceux qui disent au nègre de se révolter sans lui faire prendre d’abord conscience de soi” (1299).<sup>356</sup> He departs from the propositions of *Légitime Défense* and chooses to read McKay’s novel as an encouragement to reaffirm black cultural values rather than an incitement to proletarian revolt.

He does not reject the idea of revolution, which he depicts as “la lame de fond destructrice et non l’ébranlement des surfaces” (1299), but subordinates it to the rediscovery and appropriation of black cultural values.<sup>357</sup> In “The (Revised) Birth of Negritude” (2010), Miller points out that “Césaire’s Marxist rhetoric may have been more a means of dialogue with the forces working for change in society than an absolute commitment to doctrine and revolution” (748). In his contribution to the third issue of *L’Etudiant noir*, Senghor also enters into a dialogue with “certains camarades de gauche” and asserts the preeminence of the cultural over more immediate political preoccupations: “nous ne sacrifions pas la Culture à la Politique. Vous négligez le spirituel pour l’économique. Celui-ci est important, soit. Mais quand vous aurez fait la révolution, quel pain spirituel donnerez-vous au peuple noir, à qui vous aurez fait perdre son originalité?” (2).<sup>358</sup> In an increasingly standardized world, the preservation of black people’s originality is at the center of Senghor’s preoccupations.

Communism, in this statement, is considered as yet another means toward assimilation. In *L’Etudiant Noir*, both Senghor and Césaire situate their project in relation to, and in dialogue

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<sup>355</sup> “plant [their] negritude like a beautiful tree until it produces its most authentic fruits” – This could be a reference to Brown’s poem entitled “Salutamus” which opens the last part of *Southern Road* (CP 116).

<sup>356</sup> “Those who tell the Negro to revolt without bringing him to self-awareness”

<sup>357</sup> “The destructive wave and not the trembling of the surface” – This description of the revolution as a wave could be what Senghor had in mind when he wrote, in “Printemps de Touraine” (PC, 716): “Tu ne saurais résister à une seule torsion de ma main, / *A une seule petite lame du raz de marée / Qui flue en mes veines, emportant digues, troupeaux et villages*” (my italics) – “You would not resist a torsion of my hand, / Or, a single little swell of the tidal wave / Which flows in my veins, carrying away dykes, herds and villages.” The poem would then have been composed in 1935. Daouda Mar, in the notes, hesitates between 1930 and 1935 (PC, 745).

<sup>358</sup> “Certain left-wing comrades”—“We do not sacrifice Culture to Politics. You disregard the spiritual in favor of the economic. It is important, I concede. But when the revolution will be over, what kind of spiritual bread will you give to the black people, deprived of its originality by your actions?”

with, the concerns presented in *Légitime Défense*. Echoing the doubts that Ray expresses at the end of *Banjo*, Senghor and Césaire disregard direct political action and give priority to the rediscovery and definition of a black culture. The struggle for the creation of a distinctive black voice in opposition to assimilation, initiated along political lines in *Légitime Défense*, would be carried on as a cultural project by the Négritude founders.

In “Jeunesse noire et assimilation,” Césaire claims that “la jeunesse Noire ne veut jouer aucun rôle; elle veut être soi” (3).<sup>359</sup> This statement does not only imply that black artists should turn their back to the older generations which crawled in servile imitation; it also suggests that the creation of an original artistic voice necessarily entails a certain spirit of independence. Like Hughes, who voluntarily disregards, in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” the opinion of the white and black audiences alike, French black writers should ignore the views of their contemporaries in order to find their own paths. This approach necessitates a reassessment and a dismissal of Schoell’s and Louis’s viewpoints. Although their articles propose African Americans as models, they indirectly assign young black artists to the imitation of a limited corpus of Harlem Renaissance texts. The implications that form the backdrop of their interpretations lead to the conclusion that, in order to further the cause of the revolution, black artists should confine themselves to the celebration of the black race’s supposed primitive qualities and to a literature of social protest. In other words, they are asked to ‘play a role,’ which is exactly what Césaire wanted to reject. Two poetic creations of the early Négritude would illustrate this dilemma: Damas’s *Pigments* and Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*.

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<sup>359</sup> “Black youth does not want to play a role; it wants to be itself.”

### Damas's *Pigments*: the Impasse of Alienation

Damas's *Pigments*, published in 1937, explores the process that leads from passive assimilation to the active affirmation of a black identity.<sup>360</sup> A quotation from a poem by McKay, "To the White Fiends," forms the opening paratext of the collection: "Be not deceived, for every deed you do, / I could match, outmatch: Am I not Africa's son / Black of that black land where black deeds are done."<sup>361</sup> F. Bart Miller has noted that "Damas's chosen epigraph to *Pigments* suggests an adaptation to racism: firstly through the imitation of the colonizer, and secondly through a demonstration of the superiority of the narrator" (61). It is interesting to note the aggressive tone of McKay's verses immediately preceding the excerpt proposed in *Pigments*. The poem begins with two threatening questions:

Think ye I am not fiend and savage too?  
 Think ye I could not arm me with a gun  
 And shoot down ten of you for every one  
 Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you? (McKay, *CP*, 132)

This urge to seek revenge is only appeased in the second part of the poem when God directly addresses the black speaker: "Thy dusky face I set among the white / For thee to prove thyself of highest worth" (133). Throughout *Pigments*, the speaker struggles with contrasting moods.<sup>362</sup> From the memory of colonization to a rebellious attitude of self-assertion, the

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<sup>360</sup> Five poems from the collection were published in 1934 in *Esprit*: "Solde," "Réalité," "La Complainte du nègre," "Un Clochard m'a demandé dix sous," and "Cayenne 1927"—reproduced in *Pigments* as "A la mémoire de G. M."

<sup>361</sup> The quotation is in English in the original – the copy of the original version of *Pigments* that I received from the Bibliothèque National de France do not have any pagination. Since the poems presented in the 1962 'definitive' edition are slightly modified, I prefer to quote from the original without page numbers. Kesteloot, in *Les Ecrivains noir de langue française*, complains about the same problem (128).

<sup>362</sup> F. Bart Miller sees in *Pigments* "a series of changing voices" rather than a single speaker. I would rather argue that the collection features a single voice which, as in McKay's poem, identifies with the collective hardship experienced by black people around the world. In the first poem of the sequence, "Ils sont venus ce soir," the speaker asks harrowing question about colonization: "combien de MOI / sont morts" – "how many I / are dead." This act of identification with the oppressed black populations, expressed through the first-person pronoun, seems to suggest a single narrator speaking in the name of the collectivity. Césaire's speaker by the end of the *Cahier* would assume the same posture when he says: "Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche" – "My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth" (Césaire, *The Original 1939 Notebook*, 16-17).

collection presents the different states of mind experienced by a black speaker confronted with the colonial situation and the ensuing alienation.

Colonization is at the heart of *Pigments*. The first poem puts the traumatic event of the arrival of white people in Africa in a historical perspective by contrasting an idealized Africa, symbolized by a dance ritual, and the violence of European intrusion, causing innumerable deaths among black peoples. The poem revolves around the central image of the dead: “DEPUIS / combien de MOI / sont morts.”<sup>363</sup> The arrival of whites forms a moment of rupture, illustrated by the the capital letters of the word ‘depuis.’ It inaugurates an era characterized by violence and death. Recalling the preface of *Batouala*, the poem describes colonialism as an enterprise marked by destruction. The title of the poem, “Ils sont venus ce soir,” through the use of the passive, alludes to the unresponsiveness of the African populations who do not seem to offer resistance to the colonizers.<sup>364</sup> The reality of colonialism is imposed on Africans. It disturbs ancient customs and destroys existing societies. The ritual dance depicted at the beginning and at the end of the poem recalls the primitivist tone of some of Hughes’s poems published in *Nouvel âge*. “Poème” indeed evokes the sound of “les tambours des jungles” whereas “Danse africaine” opens with “Le sourd roulement des tam-tams / Le lent roulement des tam-tams” (1062-63).<sup>365</sup> Although often interpreted as an emphasis of the rhythmical dimension of the tom-toms, the layout of the second line can also be interpreted as visually expressing the destabilization provoked by the colonial disruption. Damas may have borrowed the use of a fragmented arrangement from Hughes’s verses published in *Nouvel âge*. In order to define the hostile character of western civilization, the African American poet concludes his “Poème” with three exclamations

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<sup>363</sup> “SINCE / how many I / are dead”

<sup>364</sup> This also recalls the fatalistic reaction of Batouala’s tribe in Maran’s novel (72-73).

<sup>365</sup> “The tom-toms of the jungles” (CP 32) – “The low beating of the tom-toms, / The slow beating of the tom-toms” (CP 28). Cook, in “Some Literary Contacts,” claims that Birago Diop attempts to imitate Hughes’s “Danse africaine” in his poem titled “Accords” (124-25).

spread across the page: “Si dure! / Si forte! / Si froide” (1062).<sup>366</sup> In “Ils sont venus ce soir,” Damas also uses the visual presentation on the page to criticize the occidental world and convey the idea that colonialism only means death and destruction.<sup>367</sup>

The wound of the irreversible separation from the land of origins created by colonialism and slavery that Glissant mentions in the introductions to *Le Discours antillais* is reinforced by the politics of assimilation which impose on the natives of the colonies a culture which is not theirs.<sup>368</sup> Inculcated from birth, French customs and manners compel the black speaker to negate his racial identity. The trauma of the process is best described in “Hoquet.” The narrator relates the memories of his childhood and his upbringing. The intensity of the poem comes from the succession of short sentences, reminding the child how he should behave. The harrowing pace of the lines creates a stifling atmosphere where each sentence, each word becomes an imperative that regulates life and destroys freedom and spontaneity. The first stanza of the poem portrays an adult speaker unsuccessfully trying to prevent the reminiscence of these childhood years: “Et j’ai beau avaler sept gorgées d’eau / trois à quatre fois par vingt-quatre heures / me revient mon enfance dans un hoquet secouant mon instinct / tel le flic voyou.”<sup>369</sup> Imposed precepts, experienced as an irrepressible hiccup, prevent the adult self from following his instincts. Three pages of recommendations, arisen from the past, follow this initial attempt to restrain old habits. The process keeps the speaker from behaving as he would like and results in a state of mental alienation.

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<sup>366</sup> “So hard, / So strong, / So cold” (CP 32).

<sup>367</sup> In *Pigments*, colonialism also implies pillage. In “Limbé,” the speaker explains that “ils ont cambriolé l’espace qui était mien” – “they have plundered the space which was mine.” This statement is echoed in “Blanchi” when Damas once again asserts that the riches of Africa has been robbed: “mon Afrique qu’ils ont cambriolés” – “My African that they have plundered.”

<sup>368</sup> See Glissant *Discours antillais* 26 and Dash’s translation 9.

<sup>369</sup> “And even if I swallow seven mouthfuls of water / three to four times each twenty-four hours / comes back my childhood / in a hiccup shaking / my instinct / as the rogue cop.”

The list famously culminates with an interdiction to play the banjo: “les mulâtres ne font pas ça / laissez donc ça aux nègres.”<sup>370</sup> In addition to drawing attention to the dichotomy which, in French Guiana and in the Antillean colonies, separates classes defined according to skin color, these two lines recall, as some scholars have noted, the reflections of Goosey in McKay’s novel about the connotations associated with the musical instrument: “Banjo is bondage. It’s the instrument of slavery. Banjo is Dixie. The Dixie of the land of cotton and massa and missus and black mammy. We colored folks have got to get away from all that in these enlightened progressive days. Let us play piano and violin, harp and flute” (90).<sup>371</sup> By adopting European instruments, black people turn their back from their past. They deny the very link which should unite them, namely a common history of suffering. The intertextuality of Damas’s poem and McKay’s novel becomes even more explicit as the dialogue in *Banjo* unfolds and Goosey explains his view about Africa: “Africa is benighted. *My mother always advised me when I was a kid to get away as far as farthest from Africa. ‘Africa is jungland,’ she used to say; ‘there’s nothing to learn from it but dark and dirty doings’*” (91).<sup>372</sup> His thoughts stem from the injunctions which punctuated his childhood as the reference to the mother figure demonstrates. Unlike Damas’s speaker who tries to escape these inculcated opinions, Goosey is alienated to such an extent that he does not even express the desire to question his received assumptions and, eventually, change his point of view. His education prevents him from feeling the need to turn away from the western world; it keeps him from seeing the necessity to reconnect with his race and rediscover its past. In *Pigments*, the

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<sup>370</sup> “Mulattoes do not do that / leave that to the niggers” – I chose the word ‘nigger’ here to convey the demeaning and insulting connotation of the French term.

<sup>371</sup> At the beginning of his chapter on McKay, in order to show the importance of *Banjo* for the Négritude founders, Edwards draws a parallel between the novel and the poem when he mentions that Damas’s “well-known poem ‘Hoquet’ unravels the racist stereotypes around the banjo” (178). In *Links and Bridges*, Ikonné goes further than a simple allusion by stating that “Damas’s protagonist seems not only to capture the mood of the Goosey-Banjo dialogue, but also imply the dialogue itself” (164).

<sup>372</sup> *My Italics* – the final words echo the paratext presented by Damas at the beginning of *Pigments*.

speaker suffers from the situation and desperately attempts to free himself from a system of thoughts which has been imposed on him.

The desire to liberate himself from the behavioral constraints learned from childhood forms a recurrent theme of the collection.<sup>373</sup> In “Savoir-vivre,” the speaker expresses his longing to yawn as he wishes, without having to cover his mouth and care about good manners: “je veux bailler sans tralalas.”<sup>374</sup> In another poem, entitled “Pour sûr,” he gives voice to his urge to reject civilized manners: “tout ce qui m’emmerde / en gros caractères.”<sup>375</sup> It is however in “Solde,” a poem he would dedicate to Césaire in the 1962 edition of the collection, that Damas fully explores the psychological trauma of assimilation. The opening line of the poem—“j’ai l’impression d’être ridicule”—reappears at the beginning of each stanza and reinforces the feeling of marginalization of the speaker lost in western society.<sup>376</sup> The first three stanzas stress the emotional unease and the physical discomfort experienced while wearing a suit. The allusion to Monnerot’s article in *Légitime Défense* and to Césaire’s article, “Jeunesse noire et assimilation,” in *L’Etudiant noir* is obvious in the initial enumeration of western clothing: “J’ai l’impression d’être ridicule / dans leur souliers dans leur smoking / dans leur plastron dans leur faux-col / dans leur monocle dans leur melon.”<sup>377</sup> However, assimilation is not only about dressing up. It also entails socio-cultural practices. The next three stanzas emphasize the futility of white society and the inaptitude of the black speaker to adapt to its conventions. The poem culminates in a feeling of guilt: “J’ai l’impression d’être ridicule / parmi eux complice parmi eux souteneur / parmi eux égorgueur

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<sup>373</sup> The original edition featured a gravure from Frans Masereel which illustrates this desire to escape the constraint of the civilized world. Set against a backdrop representing a modern city on the left and a series of jungle trees on the right, a black naked body escapes from the collar of a formal suit represented by a black jacket, a wing collar shirt, and a bow tie.

<sup>374</sup> “I want to yawn without any fuss”

<sup>375</sup> “all that which pisses me off in large print”

<sup>376</sup> “I have the impression of being ridiculous”

<sup>377</sup> “I have the impression of being ridiculous / in their shoes in their tuxedo / in their dickey in their false collar / in their monocle in their bowler hat.”

les mains effroyablement rouges / du sang de leur civilisation.”<sup>378</sup> The awkwardness of clothing coupled with uneasiness in social occasions are nothing compared to the self-accusing reproaches which obsess the speaker’s mind. Assimilation only leads to psychological alienation and madness. Torn between a world in which he has been forcefully integrated and an awareness of the exploitative dimension of western civilization, the individual struggles to keep his mental balance. The only possible outlet seems to be revolt and self-assertion.

At the beginning of the poem entitled “Si,” the speaker admits his racial self-awareness at the same time as he confesses his fear when thinking about the violence it nurtures: “Si souvent mon sentiment de race m’effraie.”<sup>379</sup> The desire for revenge seems to dominate his mind and he openly declares that: “rien ne saurait calmer autant ma haine / qu’une belle mare de sang faite / de ces coutelas tranchants qui mettent à nu / les mornes à rhum.”<sup>380</sup> The image of the cutlass, usually used to cut sugarcane, taken as a weapon against the oppressor echoes Monnerot’s thinly veiled call to revolt in *Légitime Défense* (4). It also recalls Hughes’s “Tired,” translated and published in *Nouvel Âge*. In *Pigments*, in spite of the speaker’s avowed desire to be a Negro—“tout en moi n’aspire à n’être que nègre,” the cultural affirmation of difference mainly consists in a rejection of white dominance.<sup>381</sup> The overall tone is rebellious and the calls to self-assertion, which the speaker multiplies in the last poems, imply an active resistance against assimilation rather than an attempt reconnect to African culture. The influence of writers such as Hughes and McKay, evidenced by numerous

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<sup>378</sup> “I have the impression of being ridiculous / among them accomplice among them supporter / among them butcher the hands terribly red / with the blood of their civilization.”

<sup>379</sup> “So often my race feeling frightens me”

<sup>380</sup> “nothing would calm my hatred / more than a beautiful pond of blood made / with these cutting cutlasses which lay bare / the rum hills.”

<sup>381</sup> This quote is excerpted from the poem entitled “Blanchi.”

intertextual instances, bears the imprint of the interpretation presented in *Légitime Défense*.<sup>382</sup> It indirectly recalls the views expressed by Louis and Schoell in their respective articles. In the last poems of the collection, the speaker expresses his revolt in front of the western world. However, he does not seem to be able to transcend his alienation. He cannot ultimately heal the wounds inflicted by the initial rupture and progressively sinks into hatred and bitterness.

### **Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*: the Liberating Practice of the Detour**

The speaker of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* overcomes this difficulty through a strategy of detour. Published in 1939 in the journal *Volontés*, this long poem presents a first-person black narrator who goes through a profound transformation allowing him to escape an existential impasse and to bring about not only the emancipation of his individual self, but of his entire race. His metamorphosis leads him to experience all the stages described in *Le Discours antillais* from the impulse to return to the liberating use of detour.<sup>383</sup> The first part of the poem describes the Antillean situation. The starting point—“l'affreuse inanité de notre raison d'être” (2)—foreshadows Glissant's opening paragraphs of his introductions where he uncovers “la toile de néant dans laquelle [le peuple antillais] s'engluie aujourd'hui” (14).<sup>384</sup> Paralysis seems to plague Martinican society and Césaire multiplies images of disease and degenerescence. The impulse of return is presented as a desire to “faire revivre l'éclaboussement d'or des instants favorisés” (8).<sup>385</sup> The idea of a

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<sup>382</sup> Daniel Racine, in *Léon Gontran-Damas: l'homme et l'œuvre* (1983), underlines his adherence to the viewpoints expressed in the journal: “Sans faire partie directement du Comité de rédaction [de *Légitime Défense*], Damas endossera toutes les idées qu'il proclame, et plus particulièrement celles d'Etienne Léro dont il restera l'admirateur” – “without directly being part of the editorial board [of *Légitime Défense*], Damas would assume all the ideas it proclaims, and more specifically those of Etienne Léro, of whom he would remain an admirer” (28).

<sup>383</sup> In *Understanding Postcolonialism* (2009), Jane Hiddleston affirms that “Glissant's thought is quite clearly a development and extension of that of the poet and politician Césaire” (136). The theories developed in *Le Discours antillais* were probably inspired by Césaire's *Cahier*.

<sup>384</sup> “The dreadful insanity of our raison d'être” (3) – “The web of nothingness in which it is ensnared today” (2).

<sup>385</sup> “Revive the golden splashing of privileged moments” (9).

long-forgotten golden age lies behind the first part and contrasts dramatically with the distressing present: “cette joie ancienne m’apportant la connaissance de ma présente misère” (8).<sup>386</sup> An abrupt departure interrupts the evocation of Caribbean misery at the beginning of the thirtieth stanza: “Partir. Mon coeur bruissait de générosités emphatiques. Partir. . . j’arriverais lisse et jeune dans ce pays mien” (16).<sup>387</sup> The reiteration of the verb ‘partir’ can be interpreted as a back-and-forth trajectory between the colony and the metropole. The stanza concludes on the fulfilment of the journey back home: “voici que je suis venu” (16).<sup>388</sup> The return to the native land can take place.

Two anecdotes bring the speaker to an awareness of the danger of assimilation. The first is the Christmas celebration at the beginning of the poem. This episode constitutes a welcome parenthesis in the description of an indigent life. The text underlines the dreamlike dimension of the feast, imported from Europe: “jusqu’à ce que la peur s’abolisse insensiblement dans les fines sablures du rêve, et l’on vit comme dans un rêve véritablement, et l’on boit et l’on crie et l’on chante comme dans un rêve, et on somnole aussi comme dans un rêve avec des paupières en pétales de rose” (12).<sup>389</sup> The festivities create an illusion of happiness which anesthetizes the population’s awareness of its dreadful situation.<sup>390</sup> The metaphor of the dream recalls “l’endormeuse culture identificatrice” that Césaire denounced a few years earlier in “Conscience raciale et révolution sociale” (1298).<sup>391</sup> By imitating western culture, embodied here in Christmas celebrations, Antillean people avoid facing the problems caused by colonization. However, when the festive season is over, when daylight reappears,

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<sup>386</sup> “This joy of former times making me aware of my present poverty” (9).

<sup>387</sup> “To leave. My heart was humming with emphatic generosity. To leave. . . . I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine” (17).

<sup>388</sup> “Behold here I am come home” (17).

<sup>389</sup> “until fear imperceptibly fades in the fine sand lines of dream, and you really live as in a dream, and you drink and you shout and you sing as in a dream, and doze too as in a dream with rose petal eyelids” (13).

<sup>390</sup> In the “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria,” which had been translated and published in *Europe* in March 1932, Hughes also contrasted the atmosphere of Christmas with the harsh reality that the masses had to face.

<sup>391</sup> “The sleep-inducing culture of identification.”

misery seems all the more unbearable: “au bout du petit matin, la vie prostrée, on ne sait où dépêcher ses rêves avortés” (12).<sup>392</sup> The dream ends abruptly and gives way to the awake nightmare of everyday life. The speaker realizes for the first time that the emulation of western culture forms a sterile and illusory ambition. Understanding the illusory dimension of assimilation, he starts to search for a solution to the actual Antillean problems.

The second experience which triggers the speaker’s awareness of his own alienation takes place in Paris when he joins a group of women laughing at a poor black man in a tramway: “un nègre comique et laid et des femmes derrière moi ricanait en le regardant. / Moi je me tournai, mes yeux proclamant que je n’avais rien de commun avec ce singe. / . . . J’arborai un grand sourire complice... / Ma lâcheté retrouvée!” (30).<sup>393</sup> The narrator does not want to be associated with this grotesque character. Behind his reaction lies the perennial division which separates Antillean people from their African brothers.<sup>394</sup> The speaker suddenly understands the shameful nature of his attitude. He suggests that colonial policies are at the origin of his behavior: “Je salue les trois siècles qui soutiennent mes droits civiques et mon sang minimisé. / Mon héroïsme, quelle farce!” (30).<sup>395</sup> Artificial distinctions implemented by the colonizers estrange the speaker from other black people and draw him apart from his own race. He self-consciously admits his mistake: “Je me cachais derrière une vanité stupide” (32).<sup>396</sup> Having confessed his personal bias, he can now come back home and work for the emancipation of the black populations.

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<sup>392</sup> “At the end of first light, life prostrate, you don’t know how to dispose of your aborted dreams” (13).

<sup>393</sup> “a comical and ugly nigger, with some women behind me sneering at him. Me I turned, my eyes proclaiming that I had nothing in common with this monkey. / . . . I displayed a big complicitous smile... / My cowardice rediscovered!” (31).

<sup>394</sup> This division has been hinted at by Damas in “Hoquet.” Césaire’s speaker adopts an attitude similar to Goosey in *Banjo* (90-91). He also resembles the Martinican student with whom Ray discusses in the sixteenth chapter and who does not want to meet or to be associated with people coming from Africa (199-201).

<sup>395</sup> “Hail to the three centuries that uphold my civil rights and my minimized blood. / My heroism, what a farce!” (31).

<sup>396</sup> “I was hiding behind a stupid vanity” (33).

He becomes a Christ-like figure taking on his shoulders, in a redeeming gesture, all the injustices and humiliations that his race had to endure: the atrocities of slavery (stanza 87), the dispersal of African people through the slave trade (stanza 88), scientific racism (stanza 89) and alienation (stanza 90). His acceptance also extends to the baseness and cowardice of his own people. In stanza 96, looking for disciples in his own country, he describes a population haunted by assimilation:

Et voici ceux qui ne se consolent point de n'être pas faits à la ressemblance de Dieu mais du diable, ceux qui considèrent que l'on est nègre comme commis de seconde classe: en attendant mieux et avec possibilité de monter plus haut; ceux qui battent la chamade devant soi-même, ceux qui vivent dans un cul de basse fosse de soi-même; ceux qui se drapent de pseudomorphose fière; ceux qui disent à l'Europe: 'Voyez, je sais comme vous faire des courbettes, comme vous présenter mes hommages, en somme je ne suis pas différent de vous; ne faites pas attention à ma peau noire: c'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé' (48).<sup>397</sup>

These behaviors, from those who have developed a profound complex of inferiority in relation to the white race to those who voluntarily emulate European models in order to climb the social ladder, are symptoms of a lack of self-confidence and a crisis of identity. The speaker relegates these attitudes to the past: “je dis hurrah! mon grand père meurt, je dis / hurrah / la veille négritude progressivement se cadavérise” (50).<sup>398</sup> In a tone similar to Locke’s dismissal of the Old Negro in the opening essay of *The New Negro*—though more jubilant, Césaire welcomes the passing away of the complexes and habits which had been forcefully imposed to black people in the colonies as well as in the metropole.<sup>399</sup> Jane Hiddleston notes, in “Aimé Césaire and Postcolonial Humanism” (2010), that the death of the grandfather allows the poet “to put an end to outworn notions of black identity, conceived

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<sup>397</sup> “And there are those who will never get over not being made in the likeness of God but of the devil, those who believe that being a nigger is like being a second-class clerk: waiting for a better deal and upward mobility; those who bang the chamade before themselves, those who live in a corner of their own deep pit; those who drape themselves in proud pseudomorphosis; those who say to Europe: ‘You see I *can* bow and scrape, like you I pay my respects, in short I am not different from you; pay no attention to my black skin: the sun did it’” (49).

<sup>398</sup> “I say hurray! my grandfather dies, I say / hurray / the old negritude progressively cadavers itself” (51).

<sup>399</sup> See Locke, *New Negro* 3-4.

under the patronizing gaze of the slave-master” (93).<sup>400</sup> By the end of the poem, the speaker, identified to the race, rejects assimilation and liberates himself from condescension and contempt. In the final apotheosis, he reconnects with the ancestral continent and, thus, frees himself from French influences.

The detour that allows Césaire’s speaker to reclaim his African heritage and affirm his black identity is exemplified in the text in stanza 34:

mon île non-clôture, sa claire audace debout à l’arrière de cette polynésie, devant elle, la Guadeloupe fendue en deux de sa raie dorsale et de même misère que nous, Haïti où la négritude se mit debout pour la première fois et dit qu’elle croyait à son humanité et la comique petite queue de la Floride où d’un nègre s’achève la strangulation, et l’Afrique gigantesquement chenillant jusqu’au pied hispanique de l’Europe (18).<sup>401</sup>

Recalling the slave trade and European domination, the poet identifies with the people of African descent scattered around the world. From Martinique to the ancestral continent, the text follows an itinerary successively expanding the initial description of the island to the Caribbean, the Americas—represented by Florida—and Africa. Outreaching his personal experiences, the speaker becomes aware of the common destitution of black people around the world, and, consequently of the necessity of racial solidarity. He finds in the comparison of his misfortune with the injustices endured by other black people the transcendence which necessarily nurtures the Glissantian detour. His concern seems nonetheless to give a greater importance to a connection with the African American community: “Qui peut se vanter d’avoir mieux que moi? / Virginie. Tennessee. Géorgie. Alabama” (20).<sup>402</sup> The pan-African

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<sup>400</sup> In her article on Césaire, Hiddleston suggests that, after the passing of the grandfather, the speaker renounces the term ‘négritude’ to adopt the word ‘négraille’ in its stead. However, I would contend that the choice of the later term, with its negative connotation, offers a paradox between the demeaning discourse of the colonizers and the unexpected posture of the oppressed black population: “Et elle est debout la négraille / la négraille assise / inattendument debout” (52) – “And the nigger scum is on its feet / the seated nigger scum / unexpectedly standing” (53).

<sup>401</sup> “my non-closure island, its brave audacity standing at the stern of this Polynesia, before it, Guadeloupe split in two down its dorsal line and equal in poverty to us, Haiti where negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity and the funny little tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is being completed, and Africa gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe” (19).

<sup>402</sup> “Who can boast of being better off than I? / Virginia. Tennessee. Georgia. Alabama” (21).

consciousness of the speaker seems to emerge, as in *La Dépêche africaine* and *La Revue du monde noir*, as mostly centered on the connections between the French and the American black communities.<sup>403</sup>

The belief that Africa can be reached through an African American detour is also confirmed in the stylistic aspects of the poem. At the beginning of his introduction to *The Original 1939 Notebook*, A. James Arnold acknowledges the influence of French writers on Césaire at the time of the first composition of the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.<sup>404</sup> However, the analogy with French poetry seems to shade off as the poem builds momentum and the speaker emancipates himself. Arnold rightly remarks that “the long meandering strophes that marked the early sequences give way to a shorter lines divided into verse stanzas” (xi). The final section of the poem is characterized by short, vigorous lines illustrating the frenzy which takes hold of the speaker as he ultimately finds freedom. Arnold does not however propose an explanation for this stylistic change. In order to understand its significance, we have to turn to an article that Césaire published in *Tropiques* in 1941: “Introduction à la poésie nègre américaine.” In this text, Césaire, while describing the distinctive qualities of African American poetry, indirectly illuminates the poetics of the 1939 *Cahier*.<sup>405</sup> A passage in particular seems to epitomize the evolution we witness in Césaire’s long poem:

Point de ces grands élans qui, nous détachant de terre d’une brusque saccade, nous ravissent, nous transportent parmi les ténèbres et l’infini. Le lyrisme nègre reste bien en deçà de cette grandeur. Epanchement direct, rapide comme un torrent de montagne;

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<sup>403</sup> It has to be noted that the speaker only displays a pan-African consciousness after his stay in Europe. Like Césaire, it is probably in Paris that he discovers African culture and that he meets with other people of African descent.

<sup>404</sup> Two poets seem to be of particular importance: Paul Claudel and Charles Péguy. Arnold ascribes to the former an impact on the structure of the *Cahier*’s famously long stanzas: “The rhythms of the strophes recalled the long lines Paul Claudel had pioneered in his *Cinq grandes Odes* (Five Great Odes) at the beginning of the last century” (xi). He also insists on “Charles Péguy’s insistent use of repetition, anaphora, and paratactic construction in poems much longer than Césaire’s that were highly praised between the two world wars” (xi).

<sup>405</sup> In his presentation of the article in *Poésie, Théâtre, Essais et Discours*, Arnold notes that “le lecteur attentif sera sensible aux échos du ‘Cahier’ de 1939” (1321) – “The careful reader will be attentive to the echoes of the 1939 ‘Cahier’.”

délivrance de deux ou trois états d'âme, . . . déversement subit du trop plein d'une âme vite remplie (1326).<sup>406</sup>

The grand style mentioned in the first sentence of this statement corresponds to the type of poetry that Claudel or Péguy wrote during the first decades of the century. It also indirectly designates the dense phrasing and extended stanzas characterizing the beginning of the *Cahier*. The Antillean tragedy is depicted in a style inspired by French poets, thus indirectly linking the misery of Martinique to the culture of the metropole.

Black lyricism, according to Césaire, proceeds from a different dynamism. Consisting in condensed formulations, incisive turns of phrase, and swift and rhythmic sentences, it stems from an emotional need to express the inner vitality of a soul which has to unburden itself. The final liberation, which concludes the poem, clearly reflects this vigorous style.

African American poetry was well-known among Parisian black intellectuals. In his article on "The Race Problem in Paris and the French West Indies," published in 1939, Mercer A. Cook remarked that "it is interesting to hear [young French blacks] recite (in English which sounds much like French) verses by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and Richard Wright" (678).

Césaire seems to have been particularly sensitive to black American poetry. He had written a dissertation on "le thème du sud dans la poésie négro-américaine."<sup>407</sup> In 1935, he had translated a poem by Richard Wright which appeared in the second issue of *L'Etudiant noir*, and, in 1939, he had published a translation of Sterling Brown's "Strong Men" in

*Charpentés*.<sup>408</sup> There is no evidence that these translations directly influenced the composition

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<sup>406</sup> "Nothing of these grand flight which, detaching us from earth in an abrupt motion, carry us off, transport us through darkness and infinity. Black lyricism remains far below this grandeur. Direct effusion, quick as a mountain stream; release of two or three moods . . . sudden outpouring of a soul quickly overflowed."

<sup>407</sup> The document has unfortunately been lost.

<sup>408</sup> Edward A. Jones begins his article, titled "Afro-French Writers of the 1930s," with a memory from his stay in the French capital: "It was in the fall of 1935 that I went to Paris and entered the Sorbonne, carrying with me, among other things, both necessary and superfluous, an autographed copy of Sterling Brown's recently published collection of poems titled *Southern Road*. This small literary gem of the Black experience in the United States was to be one of several links that cemented a friendship between Aimé Césaire, who borrowed it and devoured its contents, and me" (18).

of the *Cahier*. However, the parallel between Brown's insistent repetition—"They broke you in like oxen, / They scourged you, / They branded you" (CP 56)—and the style which characterizes the end of Césaire's poem is striking:

et les vingt-neuf coups de fouet légal  
 et le cachot de quatre pieds de haut  
 et le carcan à branches  
 et le jarret coupé à mon audace marronne  
 et la fleur de lys qui flue du fer rouge sur le gras de mon épaule (44).<sup>409</sup>

Césaire's description of the African American poetic style in *Tropiques*, his recognized admiration for Brown's work, and his adoption of rhythmic and incisive verses to illustrate the speaker's emancipation at the end of the *Cahier* supplements the geographical detour which has taken place earlier in the poem. The final liberation is mediated through the rejection of a poetic style inspired by Claudel and Péguy, and the adaptation in French of what Césaire considers a black American style. In the last stanzas of the *Cahier*, the emulation of African American writers leads to the finding of an original black voice in French. Césaire manages to escape the influential aura of French poetry and to create a new poetic language which truly expresses the struggle of the black race. *Légitime Défense*'s call to imitate African American poetry, *L'Étudiant noir*'s interpretation of *Banjo* as an injunction to rediscover black cultural roots, Damas's intertextual references to Hughes and McKay in *Pigments*, all these elements, which punctuate the 1930s, seem to coalesce in Césaire's African American detour at the end of the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. The emergence of Négritude, from the theorization of the concept to its poetic application, was definitely embroidered with African American threads.

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<sup>409</sup> "and the twenty-nine legal blows of the whip / and the four-foot-high prison cell / and the spiked carcan / and the hamstringing of my runaway audacity / and the fleur de lys flowing from the red iron into the fat of my shoulder" (45) – see Thomas A. Hale, "Césaire and the Challenge of Translation," and Edwards, "Aimé Césaire and the Syntax of Influence."

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that, during the interwar period, black internationalism could be understood as a web of multiple contacts between the American and the French black communities. These connections, which took place across the space that Gilroy has called the Black Atlantic, could be articulated through the notion of detour that Glissant theorized in *Le Discours antillais*. Facing an unbearable situation in their home country, black people had to escape immediate local concerns and seek elsewhere a solution to the unsolvable problems with which they were confronted. From Maran's *Batouala* to Locke's *The New Negro*, from Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* to McKay's *Banjo*, intellectuals on either side of the Atlantic attempted to negotiate concepts of black identity and find their place in the modern world in terms of national allegiances and international connections. The transatlantic contacts and exchanges helped develop a sense of solidarity based on the recognition of a common history and the identification of similar daily experiences of racist prejudices. Black artists and writers discovered important commonalities transcending national and geographical affiliations at the same time as they kept asserting local affinities and attempted to resolve domestic issues. Through the practice of Glissantian detours, they explored transnational conceptions of race which would help to forge different attitudes, develop original viewpoints, and create unprecedented forms of self-expression. Although, over time, the perspective shifted from territorially delineated senses of belonging to spatially unbounded paradigms, the national and the transnational, understood as sites of social positioning, cultural self-definition, and political agency, remained inextricably intermingled. The five moments under scrutiny in the thesis attest to the constant interlacing of the two frames of reference.

The reception of Maran's *Batouala* in the United States, as we have seen in the first chapter, mainly centered on the racial problems black people had to face in their immediate environment. African American intellectuals responded in two ways to the double detour to which the novel invited. On the one hand, Du Bois focused on the preface and underlined the possibility to use literature as a way to resist white dominance. Black American writers should follow Maran's example and denounce the inequities to which they were subjected in their daily life. The awarding of the Goncourt Prize to a black author reinforced the image of France as a colorblind country and led American black intellectuals into a detour which allowed for a critique of the American situation. On the other hand, Locke underlined the stylistic approach of the novel and suggested that the emerging generation of American writers attempt to emulate the realism displayed throughout its pages. However, in order to keep American readers from conflating Maran's portrayal of Africans with the image of African Americans as modern and sophisticated, he insisted that the customs and the characters described in the novel did not belong to the American cultural sphere. Jessie Fauset shared his point of view, fearing that, in spite of the book's literary qualities, the journey through the ancestral continent that the story of the tribal chief proposed might reinforce white prejudices against the black race. Torn between a desire to celebrate Maran's achievement and a feeling of unease resulting from his depictions of African life, Fauset welcomed the expurgated translation published in 1922 by Seltzer with a sigh of relief. Cleared of the sexual innuendos which characterized the original text, the novel could be promoted in the United States as a prize-winning work by a black author. Whereas Du Bois, Locke, and Fauset agreed that the international success of *Batouala* could help create circuits of transnational solidarities among black intellectuals, their immediate reaction to the novel nevertheless focused on its potential effect on domestic race relations. They appropriated *Batouala* to put forward a vision of racial uplift centered on the United States.

Three years after the publication of Maran's novel in English, Locke's *The New Negro* formed a site where the ambiguous relationship between the African American community and its ancestral land could be more fully explored. The detour through Africa, which appeared in its pages, attempted to establish a balance between its forgotten culture and modern American society. Many texts in the anthology suggested that the primitive qualities which allegedly characterized people of African descent could bring a reinvigorating impetus to an increasingly standardized American society. Locke also insisted on the classical tradition of African arts and claimed that an original African American artistic idiom could emerge from it. Through the study of European modernist appropriations of African art forms, black American artists could find new ways of expressing their everyday experience and, in so doing, contribute to American culture. The main purpose of the anthology was to emphasize and promote the participation of black people in American society. Locke claimed that Africa embodied the possibility for black artists to develop an original artistic language. Inspired by the classical arts of ancestral continent, informed by European perspectives on primitivism, and brought to life by the rich African American temperament, this idiom would save the United States from imaginative sterility while creating unprecedented paths towards a modern black expressivity. *The New Negro* proposed representations of Africa which responded to the primitivist expectations of the white audiences which succumbed to the Negro vogue. It also presented an ethnographic approach to the ancestral continent which encouraged black artists to study, through a European detour, the African cultural heritage. This twofold perspective on Africa was meant to affirm the pioneering role that African American artists would play in the development of American culture. The anthology placed the black American community at the heart of American society. In spite of its extra-locale references, *The New Negro* ultimately concentrated on a domestic point of view and attempted to provide answers to a nationally-defined predicament.

Parisian black newspapers from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s attested to an important change of paradigm. Transnational circuits progressively took precedence over local considerations. They became more prominent thanks to a more efficient organization and an intensification of the transatlantic exchanges between black intellectuals. Such transnational connections transformed the French black community's understanding of their struggle from a colonial to a diasporic perspective as the dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed gave way to a vision centered on a common origin and a shared history of displacement and suffering. However, local allegiances did not sink into oblivion. In "L'Internationalisme noir," Jane Nardal's neologism, 'Afro-Latin,' created as an equivalent to 'Afro-American,' demonstrated the resilience of such local affiliations as it referred to the Antillean group of black intellectuals living in Paris at the time. With the use of such terms, Nardal claimed, the French and American black communities affirmed their connection with the ancestral continent at the same time as they showed their intellectual attachment to a western cultural background. The recognition of a link with Africa did not preclude black people from participating in their immediate cultural environment. Their possible role in the emancipation of the backward peoples of Africa did not prevent them from taking part in the artistic life of the country where they lived. The black periodicals published in Paris during the interwar period demonstrated the progressive organization of the transatlantic contacts between the French and the American black communities. The increasing importance of African American ideas in these journals paved the way for the founders of the Négritude movement who would define a distinct vision of the black race and develop unique poetical voices.

Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* seems to incorporate all the elements which progressively led Négritude from a vague intuition to a well-defined concept. The influence of black America on the composition of the text can be observed at two principal

levels. First, the poem insists on the geographical importance of the United States as a pathway to Africa. Starting from a well-defined location, namely the Antillean island of Martinique, the speaker reaches the ancestral continent by journeying away from home. The trajectory he follows broadens his horizon to the Caribbean archipelago and the Americas before leading him to Africa. The American situation becomes an illustration of the worldwide oppression of black people and opens the speaker's eyes on the solidarity he should show with his race fellows. The second trace of the African American impact on Césaire's writing lies in the stylistic transformation that occurs in the course of the poem. The speaker finds his poetic voice through an African American detour which liberates him from the artistic influence of the metropole. He can then come back to his native land and play the emancipating role of the messianic figure he has become. The rhythmical and emotional structure of black American poetry, which Césaire discovered while studying in Paris, allowed him to give his speaker's voice the liberating tone it needed to evoke the emancipation of his race at the end of the poem.<sup>410</sup> *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* perfectly illustrates the practice of Glissant's detour. It finds the resources to solve the problem of assimilation in Martinique in the African American subtexts which inform its poetics. Transcending the local situation from which it stems, it discovers through transnational channels the way to come back home with a possible solution to the original problem.

McKay's *Banjo* departed from a binary opposition between national and international frames of reference, thereby transcending the tension that pervades the other texts under consideration in the thesis. Instead, it puts forward a vagabond cosmopolitanism which necessitates a rejection of any type of allegiance to spatially limited territories. The novel constitutes the only proposition to move away from geographical affiliations among the texts

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<sup>410</sup> It has to be noted that the title of Césaire's poem already hints at the circular trajectory of the detour.

we examined. McKay immediately presents the idea of vagabond cosmopolitanism in the opening lines. At the beginning of the novel, when Banjo enters the multicultural space of Marseilles, he has already left what Glissant would call the ‘point of entanglement’—his situation as a black man in the United States. The detour in the novel does not come to completion because the main protagonists—Banjo and Ray—never return home. Their trajectory constitutes an attempt to move away the categorizations—nation, race, and class—that the ‘white man’s capitalist world’ imposes on black individuals. The novel concludes on a skeptical note about the possibility for people of African descent to find their place in occidental society. Cosmopolitanism, understood as an unending vagabond journey, is presented as an alternative both to national allegiances and transnational affiliations. The notion of race loses its geographically-located specificities. Although Ray admires the primitiveness of Africans, he does not limit his sense of racial culture to the ancestral continent. The parallel he draws between the different types of dance in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States illustrates his desire not to place on a map the racial values he wants to defend. When he exhorts people of African descent to “get down to [their] racial roots,” McKay advocates, through the voice of Ray, an attitude and a philosophy rather than a territorially situated endeavor (200). *Banjo* nevertheless needs the transnational context of Marseilles to come to this conclusion. Although the novel proposes alternative terms of reflection, national and transnational models of solidarity remain in the background of the discussion which takes place throughout its pages. The detour, even if it results in evasion, is at the center of the desire to give coherence to the notion of black race and to assign a meaning to its presence in the world.

All the example presented in the thesis show that literature, often understood as a national category, does not exist in a vacuum. It is constantly formed and informed through transnational exchanges. The American Harlem Renaissance depended on external sources of

inspiration to come to existence. The international success of Maran's *Batouala* opened artistic vistas for African American intellectuals and writers: it promoted realism as a way of representing the race. It also articulated literature as a site of socio-political struggle and encouraged black people to use art as a means of resistance. The New Negro movement, in turn, was not a phenomenon restricted to the United States. It spread across territorialized borders and, in turn, affected the French black community. It became a major influence in the emergence of Négritude. Together with other black intellectuals living in Paris at the time, Senghor, Damas, and Césaire absorbed ideas which had crossed the transnational space of the Atlantic. They found inspiration in the black periodicals which insisted on the importance of the connection between the American and the French community. They also discovered black American poets such as Hughes and McKay through non-diasporic circuits. Journals—*Nouvel Âge*, *New Masses*, and *La Revue de Paris*, among others—and the publication of translated novels played an important role in the process: they made black writers in Paris aware of Harlem Renaissance texts. Glissant's concept of the detour provides a model which helps us understand how ideas travel across boundaries and can impact other literary traditions. It is through a 'weaving back and forth' between local and extra-local spaces that literature comes into existence. National and transnational planes cannot be separated: they are inextricably intermingled.

After World War II, the tension between national allegiances and broader concerns would continue to play a pivotal role in the articulation of the relationships between people of African descent. On 19 September 1956, the first session of the Congress of Black Writers and Artists, organized by *Présence africaine*, took place at the Sorbonne in Paris.<sup>411</sup> Senghor,

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<sup>411</sup> The quotations from the papers and discussions which took place during the congress are taken from the special issue of *Présence africaine*, entitled *Le 1<sup>er</sup> Congrès international des écrivains et artistes noirs*. In the bibliography, it is alphabetized under the letter 'P.'

in a paper entitled “L’Esprit de la civilisation ou les lois de la culture négro-africaine,” explained the omnipresence of the African background in modern black literature:

L’esprit de la civilisation négro-africaine anime, consciemment ou non, les meilleurs des artistes et écrivains nègres d’aujourd’hui, qu’ils soient d’Afrique ou d’Amérique. Dans la mesure où ils en ont conscience et s’inspirent de la culture négro-africaine, ils se haussent au rang international; dans la mesure où ils tournent le dos à l’Afrique-mère, ils dégèrent et s’affadissent (65).<sup>412</sup>

According to Senghor, the success of black artists and writers depends on their adherence to what he calls ‘Negro-African culture.’ He implicitly affirms the necessity to move away from local preoccupations. If black writers find their inspiration through the activation of an African detour, they achieve international celebrity. If not, they remain focused on domestic issues and, thus, miss the opportunity to create valuable literature.

During the discussion which followed the presentation, Richard Wright questioned Senghor’s vision.<sup>413</sup> Although he admitted a common racial background, he reminded the audience of the national contexts which necessarily influenced black artists’ creative processes: “The modern world has cast us both in the same mould. *I* am black and *he* is black; I am an *American* and he is *French*” (67). Beyond racial commonalities, he insists on the inescapable socio-cultural realities which inevitably define and inform black people’s view of the world. When discussing *Black Power* (1954), a travel diary which relates Wright’s trip to Gold Coast, Alexa Weik insists on the importance of the notion of “historical situatedness” in the American writer’s reflections. She explains that “throughout the text, [Wright] defines himself as *American* by nationality, and as *Western* by culture. Regardless of skin color or racial heritage, he is a Western intellectual raised and (self-)educated in the cultural realm generated by Christianity and Enlightenment, and therefore an outsider to African society”

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<sup>412</sup> “The spirit of civilization, or the laws of Negro-African culture” – “The spirit of Negro-African civilization leads, consciously or not, the best of today’s black artists and writers, whether they come from Africa or America. Inasmuch as they are aware of it and draw inspiration from Negro-African culture, they raise to international fame; inasmuch as they turn their back to Mother Africa, they decline and weaken.”

<sup>413</sup> See, in the bibliography, “Débats: 19 septembre, à 21h.”

(465-66).<sup>414</sup> Torn between a desire to show solidarity with the oppressed black populations of the world and a feeling of alienation which prevents further identification with Senghor's 'Negro-African culture,' Wright's remark illustrates the tension which exists between national and transnational perspectives, between local and extra-local concerns.

Jacques Stephen Alexis went a step further in his reaction to Senghor's discourse: he openly doubted the necessity of emphasizing a generic and transnational African culture and promoted the idea of distinct national cultures instead. Paraphrasing the words of Wright, he presented the problem from a slightly different point of view: "Il s'agit pour nous de savoir si nous faisons *d'abord* partie d'une culture de la nation américaine ou si nous faisons partie *d'abord* de la culture négro-africaine" (75-76).<sup>415</sup> Without constructing national affiliations in opposition to racial identifications, he asks the question of the precedence of one notion over the other. More than fifty years after Du Bois's publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the dilemma of double-consciousness—and of Bourne's dual citizenship—still constituted a central question in the definition of black identity. To present it, as Alexis did, as a question underlining the priority of one sense of belonging over another emphasizes the constant presence of local and extra-local levels of affiliation in the discussions on race and black emancipation. As Du Bois suggested at the turn of the twentieth century, the struggle for the liberation of the black populations scattered around the world had to be fought on multiple planes.

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<sup>414</sup> Italics in the original.

<sup>415</sup> "It is for us a question of whether we are *first* part of the American nation's culture, or whether we are *first* part of Negro-African culture" – italics in the original.

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