

Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans: A Critical Analysis of Black America's Africanist Project in the Early Twentieth Century

Farshid Nowrouzi Roshnavand and Hamed Movahedian

University of Tehran

Iran

far.nowrouzi@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Before the beginning of the twentieth century, black Americans underwent an all-encompassing process of 'Otherization' and 'inferiorization' which saw them as inhuman, heathen and demonic. Under the tenacious hold of oppressive hegemonic discourses, they were forced to internalize the dominant negative stereotypes and thus, over time, came to detest their black skin colour and African racial origin. In such circumstances, they viewed integrationism and assimilationism as the only possible survival strategies in the white-dominated United States. However, a number of factors went hand in hand in the early twentieth century to undermine the long-held assumption of white supremacy and black inferiority. This paradigm shift resulted in a vogue of Africanism among black Americans who wished to regain their missing self-respect in the face of white oppression. Most notably propagated by Garvey and Du Bois, Africanism reached its zenith in post-World War I nationalist climate. This paper tries to show that the vogue of Africanism was not a genuine call on the part of subalternized Negroes for a physical or cultural return to their ancestral homeland; rather, it was merely an instrument in the hands of black Americans through which they strived to prove their intrinsic worth and the legitimacy of their quest for equality and justice. This means that black Americans' Africanist project was carried out in the context of Americanism as a way to find admission into the mainstream society.

Keywords: Africanism, African Americans, Nationalism, World War I, Instrumentality.

Introduction

If America does not allow the Negro to find pride in himself as an American, then he will inevitably seek acceptance as a black man (Cayton, 1966: 45).

After the first encounter between European colonizers and the negroid in the fifteenth century, the Western consciousness embarked on a subtle mechanism which ultimately aimed to justify the heinous crimes and misdeeds committed against non-white, non-Christian subjects in the colonized lands. This gave rise to a constructed image of the non-white subject in which certain characteristics were deliberately underscored; by exaggerating the differences of the non-white populations, the Western enterprise of colonization managed to Otherize and inferiorize them, and thus create a seemingly defensible rationale to naturalize slavery, domination and

Roshnavand and Movahedian, Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans

discrimination (Brown, 1993: 659-560). By relating the black colour of the negroid to the biblical curse of Ham or Canaan, the immoral aspects of exploitation and plundering were condoned since they were seen as the natural outcome of the alleged inferiority of the black race (MacCann, 2001: xxviii-xxix).

In addition to Europe, the same fixating mechanism of otherization, inferiorization and subalternization was used in the United States where many of the socio-political elite of society, who were themselves slaveholders and landowners, had a vested interest in the perpetuation of the pattern of domination and subordination (Greenfield, 2001: 41). Resorting to the hierarchical rhetoric of the Calvinist thought (Robbins, 2007: 22) and later to Social Darwinism (Jones, 2010: 193), the mainstream American society, driven by sheer mercantile interest (Williams, 1944: 19-20), promoted an aura of sacrosanctity around the constructed concept of white supremacy and black servitude (Keim, 2009: 7-10). The centuries-long pattern of domination was so overbearing in the American society that remained mostly intact even after the Emancipation. The consequence of this hegemonic discourse of inferiorization was a marginalized black deprived of his basic civil rights.

Due to the unbearable weight of demeaning stereotypes and the discriminatory atmosphere of the pre-twentieth century America which denounced black pigmentation and socio-cultural norms as deviant and base, most of the Negroes, were forced to reject their African ancestral background and internalize whatever the white dominators imposed on them. For many years, the American capitalist socio-political structure compelled blacks to internalize its negative stereotypes which represented blacks as soul-less, poor, depraved, uncultured, irrational and savage. This hegemonic pattern led to self-hatred among blacks and encouraged their efforts to live like the powerful bourgeois whites. Amidst this racial, socio-political and economic discrimination, blacks opted for the assimilation and reproduction of white America's norms in order to ameliorate their material conditions and achieve economic gain and socio-cultural status; this integrationist agenda ultimately resulted in African-Americans' cultural amnesia and collective loss of memory about the essence of their history and customs (Mocombe, 2009: 33-37).

However, the dominant views against the blacks underwent drastic metamorphosis as a result of a number of overlapping trends including African-Americans' distinguished participation in World War I, the Great Migration of more than one million black Americans from the South to the North in 1910s and the modernists' fascination with the primitive art. These factors ushered African-Americans into an age of redefinition and changed the way they thought about themselves and the nature of their citizenship in the United States. The upshot of this new consciousness was the creation of a modern national African American community with a more informed international spirit. Out of this great metamorphosis emerged an Africanist inclination among black Americans who wished to achieve self-assertion and self-definition against the hegemonic discourse of white supremacy. This paper tries to shed light on the fact that the popular Africanism of post-World War I era was merely a voguish trend serving as an instrument in the hands of subalternized blacks in their quest for gaining civil rights and admission into the mainstream American society.

Dominant White Representational Strategy and Black Americans' Denial of Africa

Throughout the eighteenth century, slaves were transported directly from Africa to various harbors along the eastern seaboard of the United States. However, from the second quarter of the

nineteenth century onwards, the slave trade declined and on that account, an overwhelming percentage of nineteenth century slaves were indeed native Americans (Blassingame, as cited in Mocombe, 2009: 22). The cessation of the slave trade put an end to the interaction of American-born blacks with African-born people. What compounded the break between black Americans and their African origin was the compulsory migration of nearly one million slaves westward in the United States which took place fifty years before the official end of slavery in 1865 (Corbould, 2009: 2). Moreover, dominant white Americans tried to shut blacks from their African culture and heritage through legislative measures; for instance, they outlawed African religious rituals including dancing and drumming which they considered as heathenistic and wanton, and even banned slaves' employment of African languages (Harding, as cited in Mocombe, 2009: 34).

Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century, free coloured people in America sometimes, proudly referred to themselves as "African" and repeatedly used the term in the names of their organizations, as in the African Methodist Episcopal church, a connection to Africa turned into an encumbrance when their lives became increasingly unstable and insecure after the Emancipation. As the American Colonization Society began to plan to send free black people to Liberia, a new American colony at that time, in order to save the United States from the putative threat of a racially mixed society, Africa, instead of an origin to be glorified, became a destination to be afraid of. The diminution of direct relations with Africa signified that the former slaves stopped considering themselves as African; consequently, many black Americans became alienated from and even embarrassed of their African roots, and ceased to employ the term "African" when referring to themselves (Corbould, 2009: 2).

In addition to white America's desire to repatriate freed slaves, there were many other factors which, over time, made Africa seem less attractive in the eyes of the black residents of the United States. With the increasing expansion of European colonies, the belief that each person belonged to a biological race became more and more popular. Under the considerable influence of Darwin's theories, the concept of race came to be seen as closely related to the evolution of humankind. The conviction that Africans were inferior creatures who had not yet progressed to the uppermost, or even the middle, steps on the ladder of civilization had great practicality for Anglo-Americans who were afraid of the aftermaths of abolition of slavery. Asserting the lower status and even the inhumanity of the black race signified that former slaves could easily be subjugated and disparaged as inefficient and in dire need of white administration (Childs, 2000: 40-42). This hierarchical pattern of human development served slaveholders and landowners who actively sought ways to sustain their cheap labouring force (Greenfield, 2001: 41).

In the popular consciousness, Africa gradually came to represent a land of inscrutable jungles and cryptic rivers ready to be subdued by the 'superior' white race; and Africa's culture and people were portrayed much like the landscape. In effect, the dominant images of Africa differed markedly with those of industrial urban United States. While America progressively moved forward, specifying what it meant to be modern and civilized, Africa was depicted as a place with no history and culture where time stood still, and thus had nothing to be proud of. In this context, it was psychologically and socially demanding for black Americans to make or claim connections with Africa when the continent and its inhabitants were so badly defamed. Africa

Roshnavand and Movahedian, Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans

was transformed into a place which they wished to keep at a distance in order to demonstrate that they had outstripped it (Corbould, 2009: 3-4).

Even after the Emancipation, the American society was still inundated with stereotypical representations of black Americans which portrayed them as the savage Africans. Mass consumer culture, from the packaging of food products and magazine advertisements to the first film screens and even children's comic books, depicted and broadcast black people as picaninies, mammies and Uncle Toms who were foolish, mischievous and, sometimes, cunning but never heroic and competent. In such discriminatory and stifling socio-racial atmosphere, many African-American activists of the day strived to prove that the idea of racial inferiority of blacks was groundless and that black Americans were equal to the whites. However, their strategy which was centred on improving race relations in America had little esteem in it for any kind of identification with Africa (Corbould, 2009: 4). Rather, these activists, mostly from the middle class, took on what T. O. Moore called "a maladaptive response" (2005: 753), drew class lines between various strata of African-American community and tried to consolidate black elites' identification with their class counterparts in the dominant white race (Corbould, 2009: 5). The literature of this group of black American society, sometimes labelled derogatorily with such terms as "Best Foot Forward" and "Genteel School", was more frequently than not, written for a white audience and had as its battle cry the pathetic motto "We are like you". In order to show that black Americans were not different from whites, "Best Foot Forward" literature only portrayed the positive aspects of black middle-class life and neglected the seamy sides of African American experience in the United States (Moses, 1987: 64). The black bourgeoisie did its utmost, in Fanon's words, "to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" and struggled to show that they could be just as human as the dominant white Americans (2008: 3). These black bourgeois uplifters sought out recognition and respect from the mainstream society, a desire that gradually led them to disparage their racial origin. Consequently, they neither venerated African culture nor deemed Africans as kin; quite the contrary, they based their politics around the necessity of acquiring middle-class respectability and disavowed Africa as primitive and backward (Corbould, 2009: 5).

Nevertheless, black bourgeoisie' claim to equality through the disavowal of Africa did not quell a persistent interest of many black Americans in African cultural elements during the nineteenth century, and African American folk culture was still abundant with tales and songs originally rooted in Africa. Likewise, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a tie between black Americans and Africa remained largely strong in the significant area of religion. Black sermons and religious songs frequently alluded to the stories of the Old Testament and the books of Psalms including the exodus from Egypt and the future redemption of Ethiopia. Some preachers even revised biblical accounts to inspire black congregations to anticipate a day with pleasure when black Americans would return to the Promised Land, Africa, and blackness would be restored (Corbould, 2009: 6). Religion, in effect, was one of the few sources of black Americans' hopefulness that injustice and suffering would not endure eternally and in this way, managed to help them develop a new sense of self and a power to keep going on, notwithstanding dehumanizing forces (Sernett, 1999: 3-8). Thus, "the chief 'function' of the Negro church has been to buoy up the hopes of its members" (Myrdal, as cited in Conroy, 1971: 20) who desperately wished "to find salvation in the next world and to escape from the sickness and insecurities of this world" (Frazier, as cited in Washington, 2001: 42). Considering the

elevated status of religion among Negroes, it is of great significance to note that Africa was an inseparable element of black American religious life; as an elemental bond of group identity, the sense of religious belonging helped African Americans to come close to a collective sense of black nationhood within the United States (Rogers, as cited in Sernett, 7). All the same, traditional Negro religiosity lost its considerable force in the early twentieth century, especially among many of the African-American intelligentsia, including Nella Larsen, J. A. Rogers, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes, who denounced Christianity and professed to be atheists (Spencer, 1996: 454-455), and this meant that they had to seek their African origins in places other than churches.

World War I, Nationalism and the Upsurge of Africanism among Black Americans

A confluence of events in the first quarter of the twentieth century went hand in hand in creating a new racial consciousness among black Americans. African-Americans' participation in World War I, the Great Migration, Boasian anthropology, modernists' fascination with the primitive art and Westerners' dissatisfaction with the sterility and barrenness of puritan life led to the development of new ideas which were in one way or another concerned with Africa and with black Americans' attachment to the continent and its people, an interest that finally brought about the explosion of black ethnic culture.

As in the case of most of the wars, the requirements of World War I released a deluge of nationalism all over the world. By the end of the war, ethnic nationalism became the principal ideology by which people constructed their social identity. While reason and literacy defined humanity during the Enlightenment, "nationness" turned into the index of humanity and entitlement to social rights in post-World War I era. In such socio-political climate, a historical sense was indispensable to create a nationalist identity. As a result, nationalists were greatly obsessed with the concepts of origin and tradition and believed that they could make greater claims regarding their rights and intrinsic worth if the founding of the nation was depicted to be more heroic. On that account, many academics and intellectuals involved in the nationalist project endeavoured to create a collective memory which served to produce a sense of common destiny. They portrayed the earliest days of the nation as an idyllic time of grandeur, governed by the sagacious and impeccable people who deserved everlasting encomium. The purpose of the nationalists was to make it easy for their compatriots to admire their political parents and follow their wishes, an agenda that eventually gave rise to the formation of a prejudiced consciousness at the service of the political interests of the nationalist movement. To nationalists, the concept of genetic heredity was also of grave importance in the establishment of historical continuity and the construction of a nation or a community. They often used the concept of "blood" as the central figure in defining one's national origin and identity, and maintained that one's attachment to his political forefathers was as "thick as blood" (Dawahare, 2003: 3-6).

Such nationalist zeitgeist wormed its way into the mindset and writings of so many African American intellectuals and activists of post-World War I era. Different aspects of racism that had been at work against blacks and other minorities in the United States had for a long time denied historicity and cultural integrity to their productions and contributions (Podesta, 1991: 400). This hegemonic process of subalternization became more conspicuous after the watershed event of World War I in which more than 200,000 African-American soldiers fought in the European frontiers. Notwithstanding their heroic contribution to the cause of "War for Democracy", as

Roshnavand and Movahedian, Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans

President Wilson called it, African-American soldiers experienced ferocious hostility by dominant whites upon their return to the United States after the war and were still deprived of their basic civil rights (Ciment, 2007: 129). Though one can claim that black participation in the war did not cause any major improvement in the socio-political status of African-Americans in the United States, it is incontestable that it inspired a New Negro who dared to come out of his marginalized, obsequious mold and think about his identity in more sophisticated terms. Blacks' contribution to the cause of war politicized blacks and introduced the up-to-then intimidating and taboo concepts of self-determination, collective identity-construction and separatism to black America (Early, 2008: 13). The racist attitude of mainstream American society which neglected the sacrifices of black Americans during war time had a profound influence on the fragmented formation of African-American consciousness and the subsequent quest for history and culture among blacks in the early twentieth century and even later on. James Baldwin (1972) wrote in *Notes of a Native Son* of his dual, ambivalent feelings regarding his race and agony over African-Americans' supposed lack of history and culture:

I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that ... I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris ... and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history, I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself (1972: 4).

In such coercive climate, many blacks employed the discourse of tradition to critique oppression and injustice in America. In fact, the notions of tradition and deep historical root turned into the defensive posture of many blacks who wished to assert the legitimacy of their demand for socio-political rights in the face of the oppressive power of white supremacy. Deep historical and traditional root served as a refuge for African-Americans which could provide, at least temporarily, a consolation from the hegemonic forces of racism and discrimination and also from the repulsive memories of slavery (Gilroy, 1993: 188-9).

Garvey, Du Bois and the Africanist Project

African-American thinkers and writers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) and Alexander Crummell (1819-98) showed an African consciousness in their writings in the nineteenth century (Kanneh, 1998: 59-61). However, black America's Afro-centric project gained momentum after World War I. Among the leading activists of the day were Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois in whose writings we can detect the discourses of unique racial origin, historical destiny, and familial connections characteristic of ethnic nationalism.

Garvey, with his notion of return in "Back to Africa" movement, encouraged African Americans, "orphaned" in the Diaspora, to discover their true lineage and reclaim their birthrights. He represented "Mother Africa" and the origin of origins whose fertile body gave birth to "the first great civilization of the world," while at that time "the people of other races were groping in savagery, darkness and continental barbarism" (as cited in Dawahare, 2003: 7).

Garvey firmly believed that black people throughout the world should not wait for and rely on the white dominators to end injustice and provide equality. Claiming that “we are the descendants of a people determined to suffer no longer” (as cited in Alexander and Rucker, 2010: 783), he constantly reminded blacks of their rich history and culture and thus berated those activists who favoured integrationism and assimilationism (Ciment, 2007: 132). To promote his principles of economic self-reliance, independence for black Africa and political self-determination, he founded the first black international organization for blacks in 1914 and called it the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) (Alexander and Rucker, 2010: 781). He also established the Black Star Steamship Line which aimed to engender an independent transportation system for black trade and help African-Americans who wished to return to their ancestral homeland, Africa (Ciment, 2007: 132).

Nevertheless, Garvey’s Africa was indeed a duplicated version of urban America. Garvey stated that blacks should return to Africa only after railroads and institutions were constructed and once “we get a Lenox Avenue and a Seventh Avenue . . . put up those big apartment houses and get the bell boys to say ‘Going Up’ before you get Negroes to leave Harlem” (as cited in Dawahare, 2003: 8). This contradiction ultimately wiped out the cultural differences he otherwise tried to defend.

All the same, Du Bois’ nationalistic rhetoric was much more sophisticated than Garvey’s. Du Bois is famous for positing the concept of African-American double consciousness in which he severely decried the hegemonic process of subalternization and inferiorization at work against blacks in the United States. However, he believed that blacks’ marginalized status and their unique ancestral background had provided them with a “gift” of second sight through which they could recreate their self-realization, self-consciousness and self-respect, prove their potential abilities to the white society and find a way into what he called the American “kingdom of culture” (Edwards, 2007: xiv; Liss, 1998: 134). Consequently, his plan to find admission into the mainstream American society had little or no place in it for a Garveyite kind of black nationalism. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and his other writings, he claimed that if one had worked strenuously to build a nation, one was automatically a part of it, even if his or her rights were ignored and unrecognized in law. He based his claim to being American on the duration of time that Africans had resided in America, alongside their “gifts” and contributions to the country (Dawahare, 2003: 9). He stated that “we are Americans . . . there is nothing so indigenous, so completely ‘made in America’ as we” (as cited in Hutchinson, 1995: 146).

Uncritically embracing a number of “scientific” racial theories that had colluded to uphold the institution of slavery and African-American oppression (Allen, 2002: 236), Du Bois developed the ethnic nationalist motif of illustrious racial origins and traditions. Glorifying African history beyond compare, Du Bois maintained that Africans, more than any other group in the world, had advanced from the level of animal savagery to a progressive primitive civilization (Dawahare, 2003: 11). Greatly influenced by Franz Boas, the leading anthropologist of the day, who constantly encouraged black Americans to look back to their heroic ancestral origin (Liss, 1998: 137), he claimed that Africa, as “the Father of mankind”, had bequeathed many precious things to the world, since, in his view, Africa initiated modern industry via the invention of iron fusion, originated religion and mythological archetypes including the prototypes of the Greek gods, and

Roshnavand and Movahedian, Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans

pioneered a collective culture and administration epitomized in the African village unit (Dawahare, 2003: 11).

In a similar manner, he favoured an African *Gemeinschaft* (an organic community centered upon kinship) over the European *Gesellschaft* (an emotionless, rationalized and mechanical community), since the African village unit, unlike modern Western civilization, did not attempt to “submerge and kill individuality” and therefore did not create “a soulless Leviathan” (as cited in Dawahare, 2003: 11). The ancient African village had great appeal to Du Bois because it provided a pattern of an integrated, spiritual black community unaffected by monopoly, poverty and prostitution which he considered as the ills of capitalism. Representing utopia as a return to a beatific childhood free from the exigencies of industrialization, capitalism and racism, Du Bois idolized Africa as the epitome of the ideal society and maintained that

This is not a country, it is a world ... Africa is the Spiritual Frontier of human kind ... Then will come a day ... when there will spring in Africa a civilization without coal, without noise, where machinery will sing and never rush and roar, and where men will sleep and think and dance and lie prone before the rising suns, and women will be happy ... We shall dream the day away and in cool dawns, in little swift hours, do all our work. (as cited in Lorini, 2001: 169-170)

Du Bois discovered in his construction of the African village that his desires were not fulfilled under oppressive and discriminatory industrial and urban capitalism. Thus, to him, Africa, seemed to offer social intimacy, equality, tenderness and honour that were missing in the cold, unegalitarian, alienating, and unsympathetic urban West.

We should note that Garvey, Du Bois and other early twentieth century African-American nationalists’ glorification of Africa and its history and culture provided the underlying foundation for black national and political identity in post-World War I era. By embracing notions of genetic heredity and common destiny, they imagined that the racial and national eminence of ancient Africa confirmed that blacks in the United States could establish a new nation of equal grandeur. In the cases of Garvey and Du Bois, a physical or cultural return to Africa offered black Americans the hopeful prospects of an upcoming socio-political prominence and racial/national self-sufficiency. African-Americans’ ethnic nationalism in fact demonstrated their longing for moving from the colonized and isolated margins of modern history to its centre. Garvey and Du Bois’s oppressed black individual, socio-politically and historically subalternized by racist and colonial discourses and practices, wished to relocate himself from the periphery to the centre of world history, and become the vanguard for all marginalized peoples. Black nationalists of the early twentieth century assumed that the “universal Negro” could vanquish his inferior status in the Western ideological and socio-political rhetoric through appreciation of his African origin (Dawahare, 2003: 13-4).

Africanist Vogue in the Early Twentieth Century Artistic Trends

In the early twentieth century and especially in the decade following World War I, many European avant-garde intellectuals, disaffected by the cruelty of Western political system and the inefficacy of religion in restoring order and peace to the chaotic West, opted for the world of art

which, according to them, had the potential to change the world for the better (Childs, 2000: 27). Their aesthetics-oriented agenda finally led to the rejection of the mainstream realism and the acceptance of non-Western artistic conventions, particularly those of Africa (Rubin, 2006: 131). Within a short time, many of the famed painters, composers and writers of the day, such as Picasso, Gauguin, Matisse, Satie, Auric, Apollinaire and Cocteau, produced groundbreaking works directly inspired by “l’art nègre”. This fascination with black cultural and artistic expressions crossed the Atlantic and was translated into the American art and literature of the Jazz Age. Many rebellious thinkers of white America, disgruntled by industrialism, commercialism and their ensuing demand for standardization, sensed growing nostalgia for the primitive, forceful and unmechanized lifestyle. Therefore, in their pursuit of cultural and psychological reform, the discontented Americans in most of the fields were attracted to the long-looked-down-upon black American ethnic world and developed an unprecedented liking of and perspective on black American life. Greatly influenced by the primitivist vogue in Europe, many works of 1920s American writers captured the same faddist preoccupation with an Other culture that could supposedly save the soulless mechanical life of post-war America and also cater to the Jazz Age prevalent predilection for hedonism and exoticism. Interestingly, the so-called “vogue of the Negro” reached more popularity and influence in 1920s America than in Europe, and this is evident in the artistic productions of Eugene O’Neill, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, DuBose Heyward and Carl Van Vechten. In such an atmosphere, African American intellectuals and artists considered the unprecedented interest of white writers in black culture as an opportunity through which they could launch their literary careers and also activate social and racial reforms (Washington, 2001: 25-33).

The white American society had for long belittled black Americans as culturally deprived and unable to create artistic and literary productions, and thus had a general inclination to pay no heed to the artistic and cultural contributions of blacks in the United States. Inevitably, many African-American activists and intellectuals, viewing the elevated status of art in post-World War I era and the inspiring role of “l’art nègre” in both Europe and America, came to the conclusion that blacks could prove their merits and achieve their long-withheld civil rights through exemplary contributions to American art and culture. For instance, James Weldon Johnson, the famous black writer and civil rights activist of the early twentieth century, stated in 1919 that “No race that produced a great literature has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior” (as cited in Early, 1991: 137). Influenced by the popular vogue of Africanist primitivism and greatly optimistic about the role their art could play in effecting racial reforms in the United States, African-Americans came to appreciate (or better to say, appropriate) their African origin, a former burden that later appeared to them as a “gift”. Consequently, an African background, which underscored either the white-mooned pulchritude of jungle nights or the pulse-stirring beatings of the tom-tom, wormed its way into the works of many famed black writers of the day, including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman and Countee Cullen (Washington, 2001: 14-5)

However, the Africanism of the early twentieth century black American artists did not mean that they all started to call themselves Africans or consider themselves as Africans’ blood brothers; rather, Africa became a vital instrument in their hands by which they employed novel and dynamic ways to portray themselves both individually and collectively and obtained a more secure status in the racially and oppressive American society. The exploitation of Africanist

Roshnavand and Movahedian, Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans

theme reflected African-Americans' extreme subalternity in the mainstream American society and their desire to achieve self-respect and self-definition in the face of white supremacy. Such an instrumental appropriation of Africa and African art was greatly propagated by Alain Locke, the outstanding ideologue and theorist of the Harlem Renaissance, who encouraged young black artists of the day to embrace and imitate European Africanist primitivism to know their African legacy. Locke maintained that blacks' cultural contributions to the framework of European Africanist primitivism could prove the ability of the American Negro to produce culture and therefore his merits for socio-political equality (Lemke, 1998: 8-9); a supposition which soon turned out to be extremely naïve (Washington, 2001: 27).

Conclusion

... from the earliest days of organized abolitionism in the early nineteenth century to the present, Africa had always served Black American as a basis for articulating identity and inspiration in the struggle for freedom and survival only to be discarded, when a form of success is achieved. Entry into the American political system and culture demanded a rejection of Africa and African values. (Iheduru, 2006: 216)

The search for a cultural past in Africa, expedited by Garvey, Du Bois and other black nationalists of the early twentieth century, was in fact a quest for psychological health, social validation and collective memory which subalternized black Americans were deprived by the oppressive socio-political system of the United States (Iheduru, 2006: 217). White Americans had assumed that black Americans and Africans were of the same extraction and that all of them were inferior to the white race. This assumption, previously employed as a rationale for implementing pervasive discrimination against blacks, took a different turn and became the object of fascination of the Jazz Age writers who appreciated the alleged primitive lifestyle of black people which, they believed, could cure what Freud called Western over-civilization (Corbould, 2009: 15). Influenced by this aspect of the 1920s American socio-cultural and literary scene, the African-American activists and writers of post-World War I era claimed that black Americans had an exquisite legacy in African *modus vivendi* and thus employed an Africanist agenda to prove that the long-held presuppositions about black racial inferiority were unwarranted (Washington, 2001: 25-7). They used both nationalistic and assimilationist strategies, at the same time, capitalized on the primitivist vogue of the period and romanticized Africa as a pre-modern idyll in the context of Ameriocentrism (Gilroy, 1993: 191-3). Put simply, Africanism was just a tool used by African-Americans for a reorientation of values that borrows from Africa's past since they believed that the prospect of emancipation for blacks in the United States was possible just by means of awakening an Afrocentric consciousness among themselves through which they could change white America's racist attitudes (Early, 1991: 145). But their wish never materialized in the turbulent atmosphere of post-World War I United States.

References

- Alexander, L. M., & Rucker, W. C. (Eds.) (2010). *Encyclopaedia of African-American History*. California: ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- Allen, E., Jr. (2002). "Du Boisian double Consciousness: the Unsustainable Argument." *The Massachusetts Review*. 43 (2), 217-253.

- Baldwin, J. (1972). *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Brown, R. H. (1993). Cultural representation and ideological domination. *Social Forces*. 71 (3), 657-676.
- Cayton, H. R. (1966). "Ideological forces in the work of Negro Writers." In: H. Hill (ed.), *Anger and Beyond: the Negro writer in the United States*, (pp. 37-50). New York: Harper & Row.
- Childs, P. (2000). *Modernism*. London: Routledge.
- Ciment, J. (2007). *Atlas of African-American History*. New York: Facts On File.
- Conroy, M. (1971). "The vagabond motif in the writings of Claude McKay." *Negro American Literature Forum*. 5 (1), 15-23..
- Corbould, C. (2009). *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919–1939*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Dawahare, A. (2003). *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.
- Early, G. (1991). *Three Notes toward a Cultural Definition of the Harlem Renaissance*. Callaloo. 14 (1), 136-149.
- Early, G. (2008). "The new Negro era and the great African-American transformation." *American Studies*. 49 (1), 9-19..
- Edwards, B. H. (2007). "Introduction." In: W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*, (pp. vii-xxiii). New York: Oxford UP.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C. L. Markmann. London: Pluto Press.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso.
- Greenfield, S. M. (2001). "Nature/nurture and the anthropology of Franz Boas and Margaret Mead as an agenda for revolutionary politics." *Horizontes Antropológicos*. 7 (16), 35-52.
- Hutchinson, G. (1995). *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Iheduru, O. (2006). "Social values, democracy, and the problem of African-American identity." *Journal of Black Studies*. 37 (2), 209-230..
- Jones, J. E. (2010). "Simians, Negroes, and the 'missing link': evolutionary discourses and transatlantic debates on 'the Negro question'." In: J. E. Jones & P. B. Sharp (Eds.), *Darwin in Atlantic Cultures: Evolutionary Visions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, (pp. 191-207). New York: Routledge.
- Kanneh, K. (1998). *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Keim, C. A. (2009). *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*. 2nd ed. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Lemke, S. (1998). *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Liss, J. E. (1998). "Diasporic identities: the science and politics of race in the work of Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, 1894-1919." *Cultural Anthropology*. 13 (2), 127-166..
- Lorini, A. (2001). "The spell of Africa is upon me: W.E.B. DuBois's notion of art as propaganda." In: G. Fabre & M. Feith (Eds.), *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking back at the Harlem Renaissance*, (pp. 159-176). Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- MacCann, D. (2001). *White Supremacy in Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Mocombe, P. C. (2009). *The Soul-less Souls of Black Folk*. Lanham: UP of America.
- Moore, T. O. (2005). "A Fanonian perspective on double consciousness." *Journal of Black Studies*. 35 (6), 751-762..

Roshnavand and Movahedian, Instrumentality of Africa for Black Americans

- Moses, W. J. (1987). "The lost world of the Negro, 1895-1919: Black literary and intellectual life before the 'Renaissance'." *Black American Literature Forum*. 21 (1), 61-84..
- Podesta, G. A. (1991). "An ethnographic reproach to the theory of the avant-garde: modernity and modernism in Latin America and the Harlem renaissance." *MLN* 106 (2), 395-422..
- Robbins, S. (2007). *The Cambridge Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Rubin, W. (2006). "Modernist Primitivism: an introduction". In: H. Morphy & M. Perkins (Eds.), *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, (pp. 129-146). MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Sernett, M. C. (1999). "Introduction." In: M. C. Sernett (Ed.), *African American Religious History: a Documentary Witness*, 2nd ed., (pp. 1-10). Durham: Duke UP.
- Spencer, J. M. (1996). "The Black church and the Harlem renaissance." *African-American Review*. 30 (3), 453-460..
- Washington, R. E. (2001). *The Ideologies of African American Literature*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Williams, E. (1944). *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.