

Journal Reflections on Literature from the Black Diaspora and Black Empowerment Movements

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Week 1 Journal (From July 8, 2009, Course on Politics of the Black Diaspora, University of South

Florida & Clark Atlanta University, various Black Politics course journal reflections) –

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The early New Negro chapters (From the book The New Negro by Alain Locke, 1999) seemed to inspire a particular mission in mind that the African American had improved his lot rapidly over the last several decades. Gone were the days of the two-dimensional character who had simply been a figure with no identity and with a stereotypical personality type, that of the black Mammie or Sambo character (Locke, 5, 1999). The black man had started to find an identity for himself, one that was beginning to sprout from its roots and go full force into America. It seems that Harlem was a place that inspired a Black Renaissance, a place where the black man was able to escape from all the turmoil and problems in other parts of the country, a place where blacks of all backgrounds and walks of life could come together and start anew. Harlem was a new kind of environment that inspired many to see that a new life was possible, that people were able to meet each other and form a common bond, where “Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination” (Locke, 7, 1999).

Many blacks in the country did more than simply migrate to the area for economic opportunity, when they realized that endless opportunity existed in a place where they could put their heads together and thrive as a strong community. They could escape from the political oppression they faced in the South and the economic despair of the areas affected by the Boll Weevil and any other problems caused by prejudices. Harlem gave them a place to solidify their reputations as a strong community and create a mindset of a powerful group of people that was only rising in prominence. To those who thought this idea was only a fluke or that this newfound hope by blacks was only a passing phase, they were wrong, as “it has not abated...if we are to gauge by the present tone and temper of the Negro press, or by the shift in popular support from the...recognized and orthodox spokesmen to those of the independent, popular, and often radical type who are unmistakable symptoms of a new order” (Locke, 8, 1999). The idea of the new black man was here to stay. The Old Negro, with his conformist attitude and dejected sense of purpose, was gone, the “creature of moral debate and historical controversy,” the “stock

figure,” eliminated (Locke, 3, 1999). The New Negro could look forward to new horizons to make a name for himself in art, literature, or some other influential field. The New Negro could now see himself as a significant part of the fabric of American society, one who could look forward to finally having a voice for himself. His identity had changed significantly, and Harlem was the place where everything came together.

Journal Week 2 (From July 8, 2009, Course on Politics of the Black Diaspora, University of South

Florida & Clark Atlanta University, various Black Politics course journal reflections)

Howard Smith, Frank Fuller

The New Negro essays focus on the fact that the black man is now free to engage in intellectual and cultural pursuits, and has now reached a level of scholarship in his endeavors that are equal to those of the white man. The America of blacks is becoming a land of opportunity for all at this point, and now, after so many years of oppression, the black man can now embrace his spiritual freedom to do more and aim higher than before, at a point where he can finally break free of the chains that held him down. The youth of this generation are finally at a point where they can forget the past, where they do not remember the oppression of their forefathers, starting on a clean slate towards a bright future. The youth “constitute a new generation not because of years only, but because of a new aesthetic and a new philosophy of life” (Locke, 48, 1999).

Schomburg further discusses the inferiority complex many with slave ancestors face in the generations after. There is a need to find a way to redefine oneself, to search for some answer. Part of the way to embrace oneself may in fact involve pride in one’s race and finding some commonality which people can collectively identify with each other. One must essentially embrace one’s humanity if one had a difficult past that will help one to know that his race is worthy of being human, just as much as any other (Schomburg, 231, 1999).

McDougald goes further to elaborate on the pressures of African-American women’s status as something subject to various stereotypes, particularly the idea that the woman has lower sexual standards than white women, plus the belief that it was difficult to apply the mother moniker (as white women were allowed) to women of this race because they were supposedly not permitted to adopt this role (McDougald, 379, 1999). They could only go from the role of mammy, as a woman too busy to have her own children and to simply look after the white master’s, or the image of an uncouth woman who was overtly sexual and slept with a number of men, equally incapable of being an upstanding female citizen. Black women also could not be seen as precious virgins either, a role to which white women were privy. The double task of trying to overcome these equally dubious assignments made life difficult in the struggle for equality amongst African-American women.

“Toward Black Nationhood” goes into detail about the life of Marcus Garvey and his stay in Harlem, which inspired many blacks there and everywhere. He started out in a labor movement in Jamaica and came to found the Universal Negro Improvement Association. After moving to Harlem, he spurred interest in an African resettlement

campaign for blacks from the West, plus he also used Black Star Shipping as a way for New World blacks to become self-sufficient. After his subsequent arrest for fraud, he returned to Jamaica and got involved again in his early interests until his untimely death in 1940 in England. His work inspired many generations of blacks to empower themselves, and his efforts were so significant to the point that he became the first National Hero of Jamaica post-mortem (Bennett, et al., 1983). His work is still significant today and has inspired many independence movements throughout the world for African and other nations with significant populations of African-descended peoples.

Journal Week 3 (From July 9, 2009, Course on Politics of the Black Diaspora, University of South

Florida & Clark Atlanta University, various Black Politics course journal reflections)

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One may feel inspired by the work of Marcus Garvey from *The Philosophy*. Garvey alone set the standard for inspiring many of the later Pan-Africanist movements that exist today. In fact, his writings are of such a passionate and fiery nature that later generations have come to understand how it takes the launching of a movement to empower peoples to take their destinies into their own hands, rather than have others, such as the white man, decide their destinies for them. Garvey's work led him to be at odds with such persons as W.E.B DuBois or the NAACP, but his message in explaining the importance of black empowerment all over the world pushed ultimately for change as a global movement. Unfortunately, some of his critics, including the FBI, wanted reasons to get rid of him and found a way to get him deported for fraud from the US back to Jamaica. His words indeed ring true for the destiny of black peoples in the Americas particularly: "A race without authority and power, is a race without respect" (Garvey, 1, 1986).

Garvey reminds one of the importance of being race-conscious within oneself, not to exclude, but to help guide persons who are oppressed to the upper echelons of society, into a place where they can roam free and seek political and economic opportunities in kind with one another peacefully. He explains that Africans have had a great history and will continue to do so in succeeding generations: "Be as proud of your race today as our fathers were in the days of yore. We have a beautiful history, and we shall create another in the future that will astonish the world" (Garvey, 7, 1986).

Garvey's ultimate message is to go forth with a sound mind and body towards the mission of improving one's people. He stresses the importance of education particularly outside the classroom (as well as inside), so that persons can become "as great and full of knowledge as the other fellow without even entering the classroom" (Garvey, 11, 1986).

Cesaire was a powerful leader who reminded many of the colonialist influence in Martinique. After an early education in France, he went back there to teach, and he even mentored a young Frantz Fanon, who emerged as an influential writer on the plight of poor peoples and black empowerment as well. Cesaire was a leftist intellectual who wrote a great body of work covering early revolutionaries in French Caribbean territories

and denounced colonialism's influence. Inspired by the Soviet politics of the 1930s-40s, this drove his ideals for improving the lot of oppressed peoples, until the Soviet crackdown in Hungary, which alienated him to some degree and drove him to move towards focusing on Afro-Caribbean history. He is also remembered for refusing to meet Sarkozy in 2006 for praising a French policy in history textbooks that had a white-washed, favorable view of French colonialism, including action towards Algeria in that particular conflict. He remained influential in Martinique politics until the early 21st century.

Journal Week 4 (From July 21, 2009, Course on Politics of the Black Diaspora, University of South Florida & Clark Atlanta University, various Black Politics course journal reflections)

Howard Smith, Frank Fuller

Garvey advocates that blacks should not settle for second best, but simply should establish their own destiny in America and abroad. They should not be satisfied with being second-string in the US, after the white man. Rather, they should rise up and become equally competitive with other races to be the best at what they do. This means that blacks should have the right to become the president or an average worker as equally as a white man should in these occupations (Garvey, 98, 1986). Perhaps the UNIA was a beacon of hope here for achieving such means. In addition, this right to equal treatment should be the same in other countries. Africa should be treated as equally as European countries in terms of a great world power. The time is nearing for Africans in America and abroad to make their intentions clear, that they have a stake in the world as equally as Europe. Europe and Africa can mutually benefit one another as well by trading goods that each respective party needs.

Some of the other readings further elaborate on Garvey's upbringing and what inspired him to accomplish great things in the world. Garvey's readings convey a thought process that moves towards founding a mass movement through the UNIA, an ideology hurt by prejudice and fear, one that drives Garvey to conclude that the only hope for the black man to gain something in this world is to build his own empires (Garvey, 126, 1986). The black man would have to find his own place away from the white man to start over and build towards his ultimate goals in life.

Throughout the subsequent readings, Garvey continues to explain the differences between the races and asserts that blacks should empower themselves by declaring their own set of rights, especially since the white man has done nothing but exploit him throughout history. Having a legal set of rights would help others to be aware of them as people and to further help blacks throughout the world to unite against oppression. The declaration is strong and powerful, to the point that a natural right to African land is declared: "We believe in the inherent right of the Negro to possess himself of Africa, and that his possession of same shall not be regarded as an infringement on any claim or purchase made by any race or nation" (Garvey, 137, 1986). Overall, what we learn is that not only has Garvey given blacks a voice, but a structure by which to declare and assert themselves for generations, and a strategy with which to combat prejudices.

The second part of the film on Aime Cesaire goes more into depth about his life and his impact on the independence movements that swept many European colonies at

the time. Césaire was one who, however, preferred to express himself in his writings and was not a violent or militant activist who refused to compromise. However, he made it known that he would not accept any sugarcoating of French exploitation of the colonies, and refused to acknowledge Sarkozy in a 2006 visit to Martinique, when he tried to encourage French-speaking areas that France's influence throughout the world was overall a positive one on many territories, though Césaire would have none of this. Césaire was one who did run in politics, however, and preferred to tell people about his views in his works, to remind them of the suffering and despair European powers put on their former territories, educating them on the importance of making amends and for the former colonies to empower themselves.

Journal Week 5 (From July 31, 2009, Course on Politics of the Black Diaspora, University of

South Florida & Clark Atlanta University, various Black Politics course journal reflections)

Howard Smith, Frank Fuller

The discourse profoundly influenced many of the independence movements in many colonial territories from the 1950s through the 1970s. The work focuses on the negative impact of colonialism, and how the idea of progress and the civilizing ethos of the Europeans in fact suppressed the native cultures. The harm that was done is displayed in the book here, and the research here shows that the Europeans did little to appreciate the local culture or forms of government in Africa particularly. Instead, they felt they needed to civilize and modernize these societies because of their savage nature. The Europeans did little to look deeper into these already well-structured African societies that did not need outside influences forced upon them, which is why many of the colonies today are still struggling post-independence. Colonialism did little to help the natives, but rather, was used to exploit them to the point that they gained little, with the Europeans benefitting quite significantly.

Césaire admits that there is no miracle through colonization, that man does not necessarily need it. In fact, it may only bring despair and bloodshed. There is no fundamental necessity existing for it, and it does not free anyone in particular. The white man may feel he has liberated the African, for example, yet in reality, he has only brought ill will to his family. Césaire admits as such that it serves little purpose in the world: "What, fundamentally, is colonization? You agree on what it is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law" (Césaire, 10-11, 2001).

It is interesting to note that Césaire particularly points out that colonialism, in fact, is what made Europe look barbaric, though Europeans felt that Africans were the uncivilized ones. The sheer brutality wrought on Africa by the colonizers, for example, did little to prove to critics that such colonial powers as France and Britain were on a so-called "civilizing" mission. One of Césaire's more noteworthy claims to prove this is the Nazi regime's racial policies towards its conquered territories, exemplified as well by the Vichy regime's discriminatory practices on Martinique once they took over France in

World War II (Cesaire, 36, 2001). All of this, then, shows that Cesaire is right in asserting that Europe has done little to civilize Africa and more to make itself look uncivilized.

Cesaire's impact is further explained in the film. The fact that he continued to inspire independence movements throughout his life, including pan-Africanism, led to people finding a voice to explain their struggles in gaining freedom for their nations. Many were moved by his writings, but also his work to help his people of Martinique. He ended up serving in politics in his homeland and representing their interests almost to the end of his life. He still remained a force in politics up to the time that he died.

Journal Week 6 (From August 6, 2009, Course on Politics of the Black Diaspora, University of

South Florida & Clark Atlanta University, various Black Politics course journal reflections)

Howard Smith, Frank Fuller

Notebook of a Return to Native Land is a powerful work by Aime Cesaire that addresses his awakening to the idea of "negritude." This idea had a uniting component to it that helped many black intellectuals find a commonality amongst rejecting the racism brought on by French colonialism. Uniting all blacks as a people in identifying their common African ancestry assisted them in bonding together, as well as others of African ancestry throughout the world, to fight French cultural imperialism and a superiority complex that the French developed in perceiving those of other races as beneath them (Cesaire Native Land, 2001). Black intellectuals, some of whom later became great politicians, could find pride in their ancestry instead of a feeling of inferiority that was perpetuated by some factions of French society. Cesaire used colorful language in the work to show the rich cultural variety present in members of the African diaspora. He wanted to celebrate and help blacks to appreciate the uniqueness of their culture. The work itself rings of poetry and imagination to a high degree. The work is of such high quality that Andre Breton writes a stirring tribute to Cesaire at the beginning of the work.

One may feel that the work has inspired so many and shows the power of Cesaire's ability to move people. He was and is a symbol of black independence movements throughout the world. If not for him, perhaps those colonized under the French would not have felt so pushed to appreciate their own culture. The surrealist wave by the French during this time period also gave voice to very creative influences and unlimited potential to describing the feelings of many black leaders under colonialism and how they could continue to march on without the need to fear the French dominating and suppressing their own culture. Even the cover seems to give a sense of a figure pondering, searching for its roots, wanting to develop its own identity. Negritude is a vehicle for change: "My Negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral/it plunges into the red flesh of the soil/it plunges into the ardent flesh of the sky/it pierces opaque prostration with its upright patience" (Cesaire Native Land, 42, 2001). The work has practically become an anthem for those of African descent. It serves as a long discourse against the oppression of colonialism in general and a hope through such a concept as negritude.

Cesaire, in his account of returning to his homeland, practically uses the fuel of the colonialist attitude against the colonizer, bouncing it right back at him and making him feel guilty for this kind of uncivilized treatment to non-White peoples. The racist idea of one feeling that beating the slaves, for example, would make them work harder is turned right back on its head (Cesaire *Native Land*, 59, 2001). The slave owners are bathed in luxury, while the slaves are toiling themselves to death. The idea that the slaves had only brought the suffering on themselves was intended to create a complex to make them feel inferior, work to please their master, and only work harder. However, by exposing the reality, the slavers should only realize the nature of their ways and feel guilty, as Cesaire has so powerfully portrayed. The work is an entire expose of slavery and colonialism, and designed to express sympathy for the slaves, show colonialism in a negative light, and help others to see the negative impact of the colonizing and exploitation that the French and other European powers brought on their territories. Therefore, the black man needed to find his own place in the world and unite to combat such injustices to establish equal footing in the world through such a concept as negritude, come to terms with and appreciate who he is, and began a new phase of healing and positive change towards helping colonial territories become independent, for example, which Cesaire inspired through this and many of his other works.

African history stands as a strong advocate against the ideologies of white supremacy and black inferiority. As in the past history of the Black conscious movement in the United States, not only did it serve as a uniting tool for African American leaders and groups, but caused a great awakening academically among scholars black and white to exam the need for African American history courses, and black studies to be incorporated as a field of study within many liberal arts colleges and schools across America.

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