Richard Wright and African Francophone Intellectuals

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Richard Wright and African francophone intellectuals: a reassessment of the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris

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This study examines the ambivalent relationships that Richard Wright had with African francophone intellectuals such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Alioune Diop, who were involved in African anti-colonial struggles in France during the 1930s and 1950s when he was committed to African American struggle for equality, justice, and freedom. In an attempt to re-evaluate the African American writer’s participation in the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris, this essay explores Wright’s views on the Pan-Africanist ideas and concepts of culture and race that Senghor and Diop expressed in their convention speeches and analyzes the pivotal role that Wright had in the development of Présence Africaine and Negritude despite his condescending views about Africans.

Keywords: Negritude; Pan-Africanism; cosmopolitanism; metropolis; Présence Africaine

Introduction

Commentators tend to represent Richard Wright mainly as a critic of racism in America, neglecting his significant role in the vibrant Pan-African intellectual tradition that developed during the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris. Wright’s positions towards Pan-Africanism are unknown since the extant scholarship about him often ignores his relationships with Blacks from outside of the United States, especially with African francophone writers and intellectuals such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Alioune Diop. In an attempt to uncover Wright’s major contributions to the conversations on the meaning of culture in racial resistance in which both Senghor and Diop were involved in the 1930s and 1950s, this study examines his ambivalent reactions to the Pan-Africanist concepts that these African intellectuals developed at the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris. This paper also attempts to explore the blend of Pan-Africanism and Eurocentrism in Wright’s attitudes about Africans as they are apparent in his writings such as ‘Tradition and industrialization: the plight of the tragic elite in Africa’ (1956), Black power: a record of reactions in a land of pathos (1953 [1995]), and White men, listen! (1957 [1964]).

Scholars of Wright’s attitudes towards Blacks represent them mainly in terms of discontinuities and ruptures from Africa and Pan-Africanism. Femi Ojo-Ade describes Wright as one of the few African American intellectuals of the early twentieth century who berated Garveyists ‘for their simplemindedness which, he believed, led them into the error of seeing America as a place impossible to live in’ (1996, p. 6). Opposing Wright to Langston Hughes, Ojo-Ade argues that the former was one of the rare African American authors who traveled to Africa ‘without writing [about the continent] in a key close to

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Hughes’s’ (p. 12). Later, Ojo-Ade contends that Wright ‘cast Africa out of his psyche’ (p. 16) and that ‘his [Wright’s] self-hate, resulting from White racism and Black rootlessness, pushes him to become the Outsider… The pity of it all is that the proclaimed outsider, deep down, hungers for America’ (p. 15). Ojo-Ade continues:

He [Wright] never, indeed, left America, to which he remains attached psychologically and ideologically after he has dabbed into communism and after his self-exile in Paris. Wright moves from a moderate Black nationalism to Marxism, to a life of exile, settling down in Paris, ‘City of Lights,’ center of civilization, epitome of Enlightenment – that enlightenment which, according to Wright, Africa lacks and must have. (p. 15)

Ojo-Ade’s statements perceive Wright’s relations with Africa as mere Eurocentrism and irreconcilable dilemma and somewhat overlook the significance of Wright’s attitudes towards Africa in Pan-African and transnational explorations of the consequences of imperialism and colonialism in Africa and the Black Diaspora. Disputing Ojo-Ade’s theory that Wright ‘cast Africa out of his psyche’ (p. 16), one may argue that Wright was committed to Africa’s liberation from Western exploitation although he occasionally represented Africans in condescending, Eurocentric, or primitivistic terms. Wright was patronizing, individualistic, and elitist towards Africans who were deferential, communitarian, and unassuming towards him. Yet he shared with Pan-African intellectuals such as Senghor and Diop a loathing for Western colonialism and racism.

Another critic who minimizes Wright’s relations with Africans is W.F. Feuser (1976). Referring to the scene in Native son in which Bigger Thomas refuses the fellowship of the white couple, Jan Erlone and Mary Dalton, and remains terrified when they ask him to eat with them at an African American restaurant in his Chicago neighborhood,1 Feuser interprets the uncertain attitude of Wright’s protagonist towards whites as ‘an anguished view of Negro existence in an interracial context [which] has no common denominator with the preoccupations of Negritude, such as the quest for things past’ (p. 299). According to Feuser, this example shows that African American literature is unlike Negritude literature, since it ‘is concerned with the immediate present’ (p. 299). Feuser’s rationale neglects Wright’s representation of the past as pre-modern traditions that create restlessness in the present. Wright interprets the past’s relations to modernity and Africa in ambivalent ways that suggest his respect for African American traditions. Wright was akin to Negritude intellectuals such as Senghor and Diop, since he valued his Black culture and attempted to understand its relations with modernity and Pan-African liberation struggle.

My conception of Negritude is indebted to Irene Dobbs Jackson’s theorizing of this ideology as a terrain of contestation, or:

This hydra-headed movement [that] is characterized both by its realistic adaptability to the historic moment and its paradoxical, mystic nature. This ambivalence allows it to reveal while obscuring, to enjoy while in agony, to hate while loving, to live while expiring, to embrace all mankind while at the same time tightening the bonds within racial confines. (1967, p. 1)

This interpretation of Negritude as a philosophy that invites agreement and dissent, love and hate, allows us to situate Wright’s uncertainties about Africans and himself in the Pan-African and modernist conditions of restlessness and disillusionment in Western cultures that both Africans and African Americans who ventured or lived in the Western metropolis experienced during the middle of the twentieth century. Brent Hayes Edwards argues that Du Bois’s (1940) concept of double consciousness applies to the experiences of René Maran, the Caribbean francophone writer of the early twentieth century and author of Batouala, as a ‘move toward a rhetoric of black internationalism, but only in the service of
a greater nationalism’ and a resistance against ‘the modern self-construction of France [which] relies on an array of representational strategies to distance the nègre as silent other’ (2003, p. 97). Diop, Senghor, Wright could be placed within this same tradition of double consciousness and Black internationalism, since they fought against prejudices and alienations in the Western metropolis and confronted debilitating tactics that are similar to the dynamics that Edwards describes as European ‘political strategies to mitigate against any black internationalist alliance undermining the smooth borders of the nation’ (p. 97).

Yet in order to understand the contributions of Diop, Senghor, and Wright to Black internationalism, one should examine the dualities in African American relations with Africa. This kind of analysis requires a theoretical framework grounded on the notions of Black cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. Black cosmopolitanism identifies the interactions between Blacks of different parts of the world in a universe in which borders are rendered invisible by the power of hybridity and syncretism. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwanko describes the study of the history of these transnational intimacies among Blacks as ‘an integrative reading of disparities, similarities, and interactions between the varied approaches to identity in general and Blackness in particular articulated by people of African descent in Cuba, the United States, and the British West Indies during the nineteenth century’ (2005, p. 6). Like Gilroy’s concept of the ‘Black Atlantic’ which stresses the fluid nature of Blackness in transnational contexts, the notion of ‘Black cosmopolitanism’ is a theoretical tool that could help us understand the complex positions that Diop, Senghor, and Wright developed about Black culture during the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris. By juxtaposing Diop’s and Senghor’s ideas at the Congress in conversation with those of Wright, one can study three different visions of Black internationalism that somewhat coalesce into a nascent form of Pan-Africanism.

My conception of Pan-Africanism is indebted to Iris Schmeisser’s interpretation of the adjective ‘Pan-African’ as a word that:

signifies a specific construction of black otherness and how ideas about black otherness functioned within the actual cultural, historical and political contexts of their times, as they [Africans] were embedded in the specific dialogues and significations of the contemporaneous discursive order that characterized the cultural landscape of Paris in the interwar years. (2005, p. 117)

Schmeisser’s definition of Pan-Africanism allows us to stress both continuities and transformations in the development of the ideology as well as the specific contexts in which it evolved.

On the other hand, my definition of the concept of ‘Diaspora’ comes from the Greek word Diaspeirein (to spread about) (Bonnett and Llewellyn 1990, p. 2). Originally referring to the dispersion of Jews outside Israel in the twentieth century, the concept of the diaspora has been enlarged to include the dispersal of Africans in New World societies by historical forces such as slavery, colonization, wars, and migrations (Segal 1995, p. xiii).

Wright and the 1956 Congress of Black Writers

Wright’s relationships with African intellectuals in France stemmed from the frequent encounters he had with them between the 1930s and 1950s. Like Hughes, who was considered by Senghor, the co-founder of the Negritude, as the major African American writer who provided Africans with positive images of racial and cultural affirmation, Wright played a major part in the development of the movement and the anti-colonial struggle of francophone Africans. For example, Wright was one of the first sponsors of the
journal *Présence Africaine*, which, as Lilyan Kesteloot points out, was founded in December 1947 as ‘the principal voice of the black world in France’ with ‘influence [that] extends to the whole of Africa’ (1974, pp. 280–281). As Salah D. Hassan suggests, the journal existed from 1947 to the post-independence period of African nations, and ‘became increasingly the cultural embodiment of Pan-Africanism’ (1999, p. 194).

*Présence Africaine*’s Pan-African dimensions are further apparent in Gilroy’s representation of the formation of the journal as ‘an important movement in the developing awareness of the African diaspora as a transnational and intercultural multiplicity’ (1993, p. 195). According to Gilroy, the aim of the journal was ‘to synchronise the activities of Africanists and Africans with blacks from the western hemisphere in a new and potent anti-imperialist configuration’ (p. 195). The anti-imperialist stance of *Présence Africaine* is apparent in Brent Hayes Edwards’s ‘The uses of diaspora’ (2001) which represents the journal as a periodical which ‘was conceived in the European metropolis’ by a group of ‘overseas’ students ‘who felt following the ravages of the war that they constituted “a new race, mentally mixed [mentalement métissée],” and who began to reconsider their position in European discourses of “universal” humanism’ (p. 48). Although they embraced cultural hybridity (*métissage*), African francophone intellectuals such as Diop and Senghor were ‘universalist’ in their approach to culture, since they viewed it as a legitimate means for creating their own space in the French colonial metropolis.

Wright’s involvement in *Présence Africaine* and Negritude was also made possible by Jean-Paul Sartre. As James Tuttleton argues,

In 1946, he [Wright] took a month-long trip to France, at the invitation of Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Lévi-Strauss, where he formed friendship with Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, Andre Gide, and many others. In Paris he was introduced to the *Négritude* movement sponsored by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. (1995, p. 168)

In a similar vein, Paris allowed Senghor to establish connections with Diasporan Blacks that he encountered in the European metropolis. Aldon Lynn Nielsen writes:

In Paris, where Senghor met Césaire and Damas, he also read copies of *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, where he encountered the work of Brown, Hughes, McKay, Toomer, Cullen and others. Senghor established a friendship in Paris with the family of Louis Achille, who had been a professor at Howard, and in that home he met black intellectuals from throughout the diaspora, including novelist René Maran, and Howard University Dean Mercer Cook … Members of the group that gathered around the Achille and Nardal families in Paris soon began to publish *La Revue du Monde Noir*, creating a formal publishing link among poets and scholars of Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. It was also during his Paris years that Senghor read Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*. (1999, pp. 112–113)

By interacting with many African American and Caribbean writers and intellectuals in the Parisian geographic and cultural landscape, Senghor created with his African Diasporan Brothers a Black internationalism that reclaimed Africa and demanded its freedom from colonialism. Senghor’s Pan-Africanism was in perfect synchronization with the liberationist movement against Jim Crow racism and inequality that was occurring in the Harlem Metropolis in the 1920s and 1930s. The latter movement is well documented in Claude McKay’s *Harlem: Negro metropolis* (1940) which depicts pre-Second World War Harlem as a site of cultural and intellectual creativity and resistance against oppression that inspired many Black revolutionaries such as Du Bois and Garvey to fight for global justice for Blacks of the Diaspora and Africa (p. 117).

Furthermore, Wright’s relationships with Africans can be ascertained in his reactions to the notions of culture that Diop and Senghor shared during the First Congress of Black
Writers that was held at the University of Paris (Sorbonne, France) in the Descartes Amphitheatre on 19–22 September 1956. In this historic conference, Wright, Senghor, and Diop seemed to differ on the meaning of culture in Black modernity and anticolonial resistance. In his editorial entitled ‘La culture moderne et notre’ (‘The relationship between Modern culture and ours’) (1956a), Diop stresses the desire of Africans to seize the post-war era as a time to declare their important role in the modern world. He says,

For a long time, we [Africans] have felt in the modern world in which violence spreads and the silenced people are crushed, the need to illustrate the presence of cultured black men. The number, quality, and variety of talents should be seen as an affirmation of our presence in the world. (p. 3)

Diop’s assertion reflects his Pan-Africanist conception of modernity as a state of alienation from which oppressed Blacks of Africa and of the Diaspora must arise to affirm their ‘presence in the world’ (p. 3). His notion of Pan-Africanism is rooted in his theorizing of modernity as a situation of rootlessness and estrangement that African-descended people in the Western metropolis face temporarily before they gain a certain sense of legitimacy in the European world. Diop’s Pan-Africanist ideology is apparent in his essay ‘Niam n’goura: ou les raisons d’être de Présence Africaine’, written in 1947 and reprinted in 2002, in which he describes the journal as an idea that a group of Blacks from Africa and the Diaspora had in 1942–1943 in an attempt to find shared characteristics that could allow them to overcome their isolation, alienation, and acculturation from both European and African cultures (p. 20).

Moreover, Diop’s theories of Black culture reveal his intent to place Africans at the dawn of a modern era in which the value of human beings could be assessed on the basis of one’s ability to demonstrate cultivated knowledge of the world, or a cosmopolitan sensibility grounded on awareness of self and others, rather than on the primacy of race, creed, or military might. Attesting to the willingness of Africans to play a primordial role in this modernity, Diop says, ‘We [Africans] are therefore attached to world cultures, no matter the size of our modern capability’ (p. 5).2 Diop’s assertion provides a counterpoint to Wright’s dismissal of Africans by placing their modernity at the crux of international world development and cosmopolitanism. In this sense, Diop and the journal Présence Africaine of the Negritude movement that he edited were twentieth-century forms of Black internationalism that were similar to the nineteenth-century Black international incorporation that Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo calls ‘Black Cosmopolitanism’ (1996, p. 6).

As Nwankwo also argues, ‘Black Cosmopolitanism’ is a theory that ‘lays bare the mechanics of identificatory positioning implicit in contemporaneous texts’ by and about individuals of African descent,

and ultimately suggests that the desire for modernity, per se, was not, in fact, at the root of choices they (and their descendants) made (and make) about identity. Their goal was to be perceived as equals, and exhibiting and/or proving their modernity was a means to that end. (p. 6)

From this perspective, the concepts of African modernity that Diop and Senghor developed at the 1956 Paris Congress were extensions of the international struggle for freedom, equality, and admissibility in the West in which Wright was a part. According to Tuttleton, ‘In Paris he [Wright] became a spokesman for the American colony of blacks (and for African blacks in Paris), and he founded and joined many literary and liberal political organization’ (1995, p. 168). Moreover, as Gilroy suggests, Wright shared the central themes of the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, held in Rome in 1959, which
were the unity of ‘Negro culture’ and the creative political responsibilities which fell upon the caste of black intellectuals responsible for both demonstrating and reproducing that unity’ (1993, p. 195). This conception of unity as common political tasks that Black intellectuals of Africa and the Diaspora needed to accomplish to fight colonialism and racism seemed to be more attractive to Wright than the notion of shared Black cultures.

Wright’s resistance to the notion of shared Black cultures stemmed from his uncertain attitudes about Black unity which led him to privilege his African American experiences at the expense of those of his African contemporaries which he did not locate in modernity. He usually views Africans as mere victims of history who have no possibility of rebirth, unity, or harmony. For instance, in White man, listen! Wright describes the condition of millions of them [Africans and Asians] in a modern world in which they must adopt the ‘frog perspective’ or ‘the core reality’ ‘in how unlike the West they are and how much and quickly they must resemble the West’ (1964, p. 7). Furthermore, Wright says, ‘We are here dealing with values evoked by social systems or colonial regimes which make men feel that they are dominated by powers stronger than they are’ (p. 7). Yet Wright transcends his representation of Africans as mere victims of history, since he later sees this exploitative plight in which Europe has placed Africans as a site of Black modernity and a quagmire that also confronts Blacks of the Diaspora. Wright says that the ‘frog perspective’ ‘prevails not only among Asians and Africans who live under colonial conditions, but among American Negroes as well. Hence, the physical nearness or remoteness of the American or European white has little or nothing to do with the feeling of distance that is engendered’ (1964, p. 7).

Opposing Wright’s theorizing of black life in modernity as a state of alienation mainly, Diop envisioned a world in which Blacks of both sides of the Atlantic would overcome the painful cost of colonial history through recognition of their priceless role of major contributors in the modern world. Diop’s valuation of Black modernity is apparent in his inaugural speech at the 1956 Congress in which he urges Blacks of the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa to recognize their descendence from the same ancestors in spite of their diverse spiritual universes (1956b, p. 9) and contribute, like the Jews have done, to the emergence of an international and modern world in which people of all races could live together without reference to skin color (pp. 9–10). Diop invoked the important work of the numerous ‘black ambassadors, learned scholars, statesmen or artists [who] have won the world appreciation by their competence and talent’ (pp. 9–10), presenting a hopeful view of the Black world in a cosmopolitan context that is frequently absent in Wright’s representation of Africa.

Yet some of the theories that Diop developed in his inaugural speech were in synch with the ideas that Wright espoused. One of these ideas is the significant role that folklore has in the development of nationalist consciousness. Diop stresses the vital importance of folklore when he laments the drastic way in which colonization prevents colonized people from having a state that preserves their memory of the past, through a ‘revalorization’ of their classical traditions, and denies their right to imagine a future which reflects their intimacy with the world (1956a, p. 3).³ Diop’s theory reflects his perception of folklore as a tool of national liberation in which the new and free state celebrates traditions as a means of connecting the free populace with the rest of the cosmopolitan world. His notion of folklore emphasizes the agency of the community, since he signifies the readiness of people to be free and put more expectations upon themselves and the world. Using a traditional poem from the Wolof language of his native Senegal, he says ‘Do tu ma sam bam / Sama gelem mag na’ (1956b, pp. 17–18), which can be translated as ‘I will no longer herd a donkey/because my camel has grown’.
Diop’s imagery of a donkey and a camel helps him create a contrast in size between two animals that signifies the unequal power relations between Europe and its African colonies that can be reduced once the latter achieve their independence and realize their power to think for themselves despite their former colonizers’ attempt to teach them how to see themselves and the world. Diop then anticipated the tremendous power to achieve big goals such as national unity and economic and political development through the nationalist use of culture and cosmopolitan sensibilities that were not forced upon them.

In a similar vein, Wright perceived culture, and specifically folklore, as an instrument for nationalist and political liberation of Blacks. Describing African American interest in African survivals, Wright says:

If the American Negro retained, in part and for a time, remnants of his background of traditional African attitudes, it was because he couldn’t see or feel or trust (at that moment in history) any other system or value or belief that could interpret the world and make it meaningful enough for him to act and rely upon it. What the social scientist should seek for are not ‘African survivals’ at all, but the persistence and vitality of primal attitudes and the social causes thereof. (1953, p. 296)

This statement shows that Wright somewhat acknowledged the survival of African cultures in African American culture. He considered these African retentions as identities that the enslaved Blacks invent in the New World, since they were not allowed to coexist harmoniously with whites and Western culture. In this sense, Wright was interested not just in Black culture itself, but in its sociological significance as tools of resistance against oppression, inviting us to acknowledge the functional as well as the modern and traditional roots of African American civilization. Bongasu Tanla-Kishani argues that:

The African who went to the West Indies, or to the American continent, left behind only his former cultural products but turned his attention towards the forging of new ones. But we have to note also that he took along whatever his mind could remember. Hence, proverbs, tales, pockets of secret languages and other forms of oral tradition subsist and are very much similar between these peoples and Africans. (1976, p. 111)

By the same token, Wright invites a materialistic interpretation of traditions that suggests that one creates culture because of ‘need’ rather than ‘want’ in an attempt to develop a nationalist or collective resistance against domination. Wright provides an affirmative and resistive view of African American folklore when he describes it as a receptacle of a Black national culture. He writes:

Negro folklore contains, in a measure that puts to shame more deliberate forms of Negro expression, the collective sense of Negro life in America. Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look at this body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a common fate. Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of value in life as it is lived, a recognition that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old. And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed. (1978, p. 41)

Wright’s conception of folklore as the ‘vital beginnings’ of ‘life as it is lived’ presupposes a Negritudinal attitude towards art and life. His representation of folklore as an integral part of the communal life of African Americans who realize ‘a meaning in their suffering’ seems to emanate from ethics such as ‘Emotional personalism, spontaneous spirituality, [and] an instinctive communal sense’ which as, Albert Gérard points out, are ‘[Negritude] values which the white world has long yearned for’ though they may not be ‘specifically African’ (1962, p. 132).
Moreover, Wright’s representation of folklore as a national culture that imitates life resonates with Senghor’s portrayal of ‘art’ as the African’s way of ‘restoring the order of the world’ through ‘the reinforcement of the life forces in the universe’ (1970 [1994], p. 35). Senghor writes: ‘In this way, we reinforce ourselves at the same time, both as interdependent forces and as beings whose being consists in revitalizing ourselves in the re-creation of art’ (p. 35). Senghor’s depiction of art as a means for using the strength of life forces and invigorating African society is consistent with Wright’s representation of folklore as a tool for employing tradition to regenerate the communal potency of African American people. The objectives of both treatments of art are to create a liberating national culture which resists both internal and external colonization. According to Senghor, the aim of entertainment such as poetry, song, dances, sculpture, and painting is ‘to re-create the universe and the contemporary world, but in a more harmonious way by making use of African humor, which corrects distortions at the expense of the foreign Fulani and the white conquerors’ (p. 33). In Senegal, ethnic groups such as the Fulani, Serer, Tukulor, Mandinka, and Wolof have preserved the custom of making ethnic jokes against one another in order to invoke the power, social, and cultural relationships between themselves during historical and modern times. As Tijan Sallah writes, these groups ‘have traded goods and intermarried with their neighbours in the past, today their relationship is one of tolerance and mutual jokes, which is known by the Wolof as kal’ (1996, p. 9).

The materialistic and dialectic relationships between African ethnic groups mirror those between whites and Blacks in the United States in which Wright, like Senghor, perceives folklore as a powerful tool of African resistance against European racial subjugation. For instance, Wright represents the John Henry tales that evolved out of slave culture as the kind of rich and neglected folklore that the African American created ‘in absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture’ to embody ‘the memories and hopes of his struggles’ and his ‘longing for freedom’ in ‘the fluid state of living speech’ (1978, p. 41). Wright’s description of the importance of folklore in African American history shows that his conception of culture is, as Senghor’s, nationalist and oriented towards a spiritualistic and communalistic theory of art. Both Wright and Senghor validate the crucial role of art in national and transnational resistance, which is a thesis that resonates with Fanon’s argument that:

‘Far from keeping aloof from other nations, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture’ (1963, p. 199)

I ideological discord between Wright and Africans

Yet Wright had major differences with the Negritude intellectuals of the 1956 Congress on the importance of culture and nationalism in anti-colonial liberation struggle. For instance, he was troubled by the concept of culture that Senghor gave in a speech which celebrated the 1955 Bandung Conference as an opportunity for Africans and Asians to be brought together not by the Cold War competition between the United States and Russia, but by their need to affirm their ‘personality’ and join the utopic cosmopolitan meeting between civilizations that he calls ‘au rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir’ (1956, p. 51). This meeting signifies Senghor’s dream of a universal civilization that is created from the contributions of people worldwide. In his address at the 1956 Congress in Paris, Senghor made further connections between the Bandung Conference and people of African descent by representing the summit as a tribute to the spirit of oppressed people, such as
continental Africans, Native Americans and African Americans who have all been victims of Europe's modern technological advances (p. 51). In addition, Senghor asserted:

European Renaissance was built upon the ruins of negro-African civilization, and America was developed by the sweat and blood of Black people. The slave trade took the lives of two hundred million Africans. But does anyone know how many rich cultures of Africa were lost during this trade? Thanks to God, the fire did not die, since the seed of life survived in the hearts of murdered bodies, allowing us [blacks] to have our Renaissance. But this Renaissance depends more on the work of black writers and artists than of black politicians. (1956, p. 51)

Senghor’s imagery of untamed fire that has survived ‘in the hearts of murdered bodies’ invokes the intellectual and spiritual resistance of Africans such as himself against the tabula rasa (clean slate) that Europe had intended to make of Africa by placing the continent on the fringes of its metropolis. As Masao Miyoshi argues, when the [European] colonizers drew borders at will, they inscribed their appropriation on a map and joined or fragmented various ethnic groups (1993, p. 729). According to Miyoshi, ‘those [colonized people] who were encircled by a more or less arbitrary cartographic form were inducted into servitude on behalf of the distant and unseen metropolis’ (p. 729). Senghor was able to disrupt this colonial arrangement by using the marginal and peripheral position Europe gave to Africa in its metropolis as a site from where he was able to revive the ‘murdered bodies’ and souls of Africans in an attempt to resist Europe on its own terrain. In so doing, Senghor practiced the subtle anti-colonial resistance strategy that Simon Gikandi suggests in his groundbreaking argument that ‘The task of decolonization must be taken to the metropolis itself; the imperial mythology has to be confronted on its home ground.’

Moreover, in the passage discussed above, Senghor denounces the traumatic effects of Western capitalism and slavery on people of African descent and creates a strong historical linkage between Blacks of both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. His assertions attest to his Pan-African view of Black oppression and his trust in the ability of Black writers of both sides of the Atlantic Ocean to recapture and revitalize African culture. Senghor was able to connect Blacks of the Diaspora and Africa by identifying them as descendants of the same people who built Western Renaissance, modernity, and Capitalism with their own lives without being paid for the irreparable physical, cultural, and intellectual losses that their ancestors sacrificed for the development of the modern world. By attacking Western oppression in such terms, Senghor created a scathing transnational image of the Middle Passage that was marked by fragmentation and loss of African lives in order to exhort Black writers to appease the memory of their ancestors through awareness and valuation of their cultures.

Yet Senghor’s concept of Black culture is occasionally essentialist. For instance, Senghor says:

The Negro is a man of nature. He traditionally lives off and with the earth, in and by the cosmos [...] He is sound, smell, rhythm, forms and colors; unlike the white man, he is more tactful than watchful. He feels more than he sees: he feels himself. (1956, p. 52)

Using this essentialist hypothesis, Senghor constructed his theory of the physiopsychology of Blacks that Janet G. Vaillant describes as a ‘conception of the Negro–African aesthetic and sensibility in a carefully prepared speech that explored the dichotomy in art and culture’ (1990, p. 285). Senghor’s physiopsychology of Blacks is evident in his belief that the African’s notion of ‘reason’ is ‘synthetic’ and ‘participatory’ while the European’s concept of ‘reason’ is ‘antagonistic’ and ‘analytical’ (1956, pp. 52–53). Senghor’s physiopsychology of Blacks originated in his 1939 essay entitled ‘ce que l’homme noir
nous apporte’ in which he developed his much talked about idea that ‘L’émotion est nègre, comme la raison hellène’ (‘The Black man feels while the White man reasons’ [2004]). This controversial maxim suggests Senghor’s distinction between the ways in which Africans and Europeans have traditionally related to nature. Senghor’s theory posits that Africans use feeling and tact in order to understand objects and live in intimate and harmonious relations with nature. From this essentialist perspective, Europeans are unlike Africans, since they use ‘reason’, not ‘feeling’, in an attempt to understand nature and its objects. Senghor’s essentialist theory of the difference between Blacks and whites stemmed from his perception of the relationships between Europeans and nature as discordant and exploitative. In an interview with Alfred Guillaume, Senghor revisited his thesis by saying that the European tames and exploits nature while the African co-habits with it as ‘the reality of the overpowering object to which he [or she] yields’ (Guillaume 1979, p. 846). 7

Despite its essentialist nature, Senghor’s theory of the different ways in which Africans and Europeans relate to nature evolves from a theory of physiopsychology that is grounded on cosmopolitanism and the attempt to bring Blacks towards other societies and cultures of the universe. As Appiah suggests, cosmopolitanism intertwines the idea that ‘we have obligations to others’ and the notion that ‘we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance’ (2006, p. xv). Senghor was a pioneer of cosmopolitanism since his Negritude sought to bridge the gaps between African and European societies and form a universal civilization to which people from all cultures could contribute without erasing differences amongst them. Senghor called the encounter between these cultures the ‘rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir’ (‘the meeting where one gives and takes’) (1956, p. 51). Senghor’s Negritude transcends racial and ethnic boundaries, since it reveals the Black writers’ desire to reach out to the world beyond his/her immediate and local universe. As Sylvia Washington Bâ argues, ‘Senghor sees as a permanent characteristic of the black man a certain emotive sensitivity, an affective rapport with the forces and forms of the universe, a direct and immediate contact with “the other”’ (1973, p. 74). This yearning for intimacies with the world is a key tenet of Senghor’s cosmopolitanism. Yet Senghor knew that Europe had practices that weakened the Black person’s desire to achieve cosmopolitanism in the world. In his 1956 Congress address, Senghor laments Europe’s requirement that Africans give up ‘culture’ and ‘race’ before they can be allowed to contribute to ‘the civilization of the universal’ (p. 377). Alternatively, Senghor believes that the creation of a ‘universal civilization’ requires a certain unity among Blacks given that this aimed world culture is going to have everyone’s contribution (p. 377).

Senghor’s cosmopolitanism is also apparent in the way in which he perceived Présence Africaine as a major tool in the development of close relationships between Africans and the world. As Sallah D. Hassan argues, Senghor defines Présence Africaine as ‘simultaneously a partner and a facilitator in the dialogue’ between Africa and Europe (1999, p. 196). Hassan continues:

Dialogue is here charged with a utopic potentiality, in which cultural exchange becomes the telos of the journal: Présence Africaine established the dialogue with the West; Présence Africaine has no other ambition but a dialogue; Présence Africaine represents the will of the ‘black man’ to dialogue. As formulated by Senghor and Rabemananjara in the late 60s, the dialogue takes place across cultures and races, between the colonizer and colonized, between the ‘black man’ and various ‘others’. (p. 196)

Senghor’s conception of Présence Africaine appropriates Europe’s cosmopolitan discourse on the equality of singular races and cultures in order to place the human rights of
Africans at its center, transforming the metropolis into an idea that integrates rather than rejects Africa. Senghor uses a direct and tactical confrontation of French colonial tradition by stating:

To be really ourselves, we had to embody Negro African culture in twentieth-century realities. To enable our negritude to be, instead of a museum piece, the efficient instrument of liberation, it was necessary to cleanse it of its dross and include it in the united movement of the contemporary world. (1956, p. 103).§

Senghor’s assertion validates African pride in Negritude as an intellectual movement of resistance against colonialism. His theory had positive influences on the other Black intellectuals who attended the Congress. As Vaillant points out, ‘So great was Senghor’s prestige among French-speaking blacks, and so well-known his general position, that this formal exposition of his views brought only their praise’ (1990, p. 285). Yet Senghor’s rhetoric of African culture and resistance was not unanimously appreciated since Wright had serious disagreements with it.

Senghor’s physiopsychology of Blacks was not pleasing to Wright who was disturbed by the intimate and harmonious relationships that Senghor established between Africans and culture. Reacting to Senghor’s speech, Wright said,

I was stupefied with admiration with what Leopold Senghor said here today … It was a brilliant speech and a revelation to me – a brilliance poured out in impeccable, limpid French, about the mentality and sensibility of the African; – a poetic world, rich, dynamic, moving, tactile, rhythmic. Yet, as I admired it, a sense of uneasiness developed in me … This is not hostility; this is not criticism. I am asking a question of brothers. I wonder where do I, an American Negro, conditioned by the harsh industrial, abstract force of the Western world … where do I stand in relation to that culture? If I were of another colour or race, I would say ‘All this is very exotic, but it is not directly related to me’ and I could let it go at that. I can not … I am black and he is black; I am an American and he is French, and so there you are. And yet there is a schism in our relationship, not political but profoundly human. Everything I have written and said has been in defense of the culture that Leopold Senghor describes … and yet, if I try to fit myself into that society, I feel uncomfortable. (1956a, p. 67)§

The schism to which Wright alludes is the difference that he anticipated between his representation of the West and those of the Africans at the Congress. Wright thought that Africans were trapped in a space in which they could only imagine an exotic world to pit against the West and its values. Wright viewed himself as being different from Africans, since he believed that his African American identity gave him a special place in the West and allowed him to transcend the cultural exoticism of Senghor. As John M. Reilly points out, Wright saw himself as a Westerner who was ‘thereby privileged to see “both worlds from another, and third, point of view”’ (1986, p. 511). These second and third sights of Wright are apparent in White man, listen! (1957 [1964]) where he describes the African as a person who is trapped in the Western world and its modernity while he Wright can move freely within them in spite of the disembodiment they have created in his soul. In this book, Wright theorizes the Africans’ dilemma in European culture as ‘An agony [which] was induced into the native heart, rotting and pulverizing it as it tried to live under a white domination with which it could not identify in any real sense, a white domination that mocked it’ (p. 5).

The passage attests to Wright’s perception of the relations between Africans and the West in antithetical terms, because this dichotomy allows him to understand the similarity between the effect of colonialism and racism on Blacks. For Wright, Africans were, like African Americans, in a bind since they too were ridiculed and alienated by Western
societies from which they were unable to sever themselves. In *White man, listen!* Wright asserts:

The more Westernized that native heart became, the more anti-Western it had to be, for that heart was now weighing itself in terms of white Western values that made it feel degraded. Vainly attempting to embrace the world of white faces that rejected it, it recoiled and sought refuge in the ruins of moldering tradition. But it was too late; it was trapped; it found haven in neither. (p. 5).

Here, Wright shows that Africans were no more liberated from modernity than African Americans were since Western cultures caught both groups and relegated them to the status of outsiders in its metropolis. This dilemma of Blacks in Western cultures suggests the interwoven relationship between Europeans and Africans, or what Gikandi describes as the ‘mutual imbrication’ between ‘metropolis and colony’ (1996, p. 228).

Critics often perceive Wright’s relations with Africa in terms of disjunctions only, neglecting his complex relationships with Africans and the colonial world. This neglect prevents us from seeing Wright as an intellectual whose anti-colonialist and anti-racist ideas were latent forms of Pan-Africanism and Black nationalism that emerged alongside the patronizing views that he held about Africans at the 1956 Congress of Black Writers in Paris. Given that the year 2008 marks the centennial celebration of Wright’s anniversary, a re-assessment of his views of Africa is very timely since it allows us to study his analysis of the connections between racism in America and colonialism in Africa. Wright’s radical ideas about colonialism outweigh his biased and Eurocentric analyses of the impact of cultural and racial essentialisms in Africa. Though these elements in Wright’s work contradict each other, they help us make a holistic study of a major Black intellectual who never doubted his allegiance for Pan-African struggle and culture, locally or globally, but who nonetheless wanted to be perceived primarily as a modern and self-righteous individual.

Notes

1. (Wright 1968, p. 70–71).
5. Quoted in Ball (2004, p. 3).
7. See Guillaume (1979, p. 846).

References


