FROM THE MELTING POT TO DIVERSITY AND MULTICULTURALISM

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Abstract: A close look at a map of Africa and the two Americas, first published by Janheinz Jahn in Muntu, Umrisse der neoafrikanischen Kultur (Düsseldorf-Köln: Eugen Diedrichs Verlag, 1958) reveals the striking form of Africa and South America, the obvious connection between the concave form of Western Africa and the corresponding part of the American continent, both linked by arrows indicating the spreading of the African cultural elements by means of the slave trade. Some arrows lead to the Southern, Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking America, others lead to the English-speaking states of the North. Another arrow connects New Orleans to Chicago and New York, from where the so-called "Harlem style" found its own way to Europe Along such routes the African slaves crossed the ocean, bringing with them the New World their cultural heritage.

Keywords: slavery, racism, culture, conservation, ethnicity

A surprising and interesting motivation of slavery is provided by Romanian historian and politician Mihail Kogălniceanu, who, as early as 1853, explained:

> "The need to repopulate the newly discovered countries of America whose native populations had been diminished by the sword of the conquerors and the fire of the preachers, and the hardships of colonial agriculture in the conditions of a killing climate for the Europeans, gave birth to the slave trade; it was a new kind of slavery, the pretext of which was the inferiority of the African kind as compared to the white kind, and which very soon comprised the mulattoes as well… The center of this new kind of slavery is nowadays the most civilized and most deeply religious nation in America, the United States."

Despised by the new masters, this culture survived, far from the surface of the official culture, as a folk culture. Everything that happened to cross the barrier of refusal and to come to the attention of the literary public was only accepted after being most carefully cleaned by any African element. Any literary production had to obey to the established European norms and values. There was no other way out. Far from the refinement of the first works by African writers in Europe, written in faultless English, Latin, Dutch, and Portuguese – the result of Enlightenment experiments meant to prove the famous statement of Rousseau that all men are, by their nature, equal – the writings of the first African American authors were nothing but simple narratives, based upon their own life experience, written in a vivid language, not seldom brushed up by careful editors.

For many years, the changing demographic fabric of the United States has been the subject of much public discourse and debate. At the same time, issues of lifestyle preferences and challenges to traditional views about gender, race and ethnicity, and class roles have raised central questions revolving around what it means to live in America and be an American. Within this context, ideas of multiculturalism, diversity, unity, balkanization, the United States as a melting pot and assimilation have filled the news and print media as well as many books exploring the meaning and consequences of these ideas.

The migration of blacks to America that began with the transatlantic slave trade established a permanent link between Africa and the Americas. Today, this forced journey of savage horrors is being understood in new ways. If it brought an unwilling people to a strange land, it also initiated the transformation of an African cultural consciousness into an African

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American one as Africans sold into slavery transplanted their cultures to the New World. This situation turned into a contradictory experience of neither being in one world nor welcomed in another.

Migration and exile, crossing and even transgressing boundaries have become a natural arena for exploration by the novelist. By closing gaps, by raising consciousness about the past, multiculturalism tries to restore a sense of wholeness in a postmodern era that fragments human life and thought. Whether community is always attained or not is difficult to say because multiculturalism is still evolving. Concepts of race, class, culture, gender and ethnicity are the driving themes of a multicultural approach, which also promotes respect for the dignity of the lives and voices of the forgotten.

America has long been called "the Melting Pot" due to the fact that it is made up of a varied mix of races, cultures and ethnicities. The concern here is with the relatively limited diversity caused by large-scale immigration of people perceived to be "different" who do not simply melt away into state/nation they have settled among but are ethnically visible and so various multicultural, multiethnic and do not seem to be short term only. The "difference" in question is typically marked by various forms of racism and similar forms of ideologies as the migrants come from societies or groups that have been historically ruled and/or perceived as inferior by the societies into which they have settled.

Indigenous populations like Native American tribes were brought into the American social system via conquest. They have either remained isolated Native Americans or they have conformed to the "American tradition." Succeeding waves of immigrants have undergone a similar acculturation and assimilation process in which acquisition of and dependence upon a national ideology is attained. The predominance of the American *melting pot* thesis is represented by the acceptance of an adaptation process encountered by all groups entering American society.

The earliest reference to the American melting pot image is found in St. Hector John de Crevecoeur *Letters from An American Farmer*, published in London in 1782, but written about ten years earlier. In this monograph de Crevecoeur, himself a naturalized American from France, commenting on the mixture of English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, German and Swedish elements that made up the American, "this new man", came with the following explanation:

> "…He [the American] is neither a European nor the descendant of a European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds... The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared" (J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*).

One century later, Theodore Roosevelt echoed de Crevecoeur's observation, even employing some of his imagery: "We Americans are the children of the crucible."[1]A decade after Roosevelt's remark, the great historian Frederick Jackson Turner reinforced the words of de Crevecoeur and Roosevelt. He wrote that the United States "fused" immigrants "into a mixed race."

Lord James Bryce, the British observer of American life and a one-time ambassador to the United States, in the 1890s also saw the melting pot's assimilating power. He stated: "What the traveler, and what the Americans themselves delight to point out to him, is the

[1]Theodore Roosevelt, "American People," in *Theodore Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, ed. Albert Bushnell Hart and Herbert Ferleger (New York: Roosevelt Memorial Association, 1941), 10.

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amazing solvent power which American institutions, habits, and ideas exercise upon newcomers of all races."

Then in 1909, Israel Zangwill, the son of Jewish immigrants, wrote a play, *The Melting Pot*, which played before audiences of several American cities. Everywhere it received high praise. It showed the melting pot as an American reality by portraying the life of David Quixano, a Jewish immigrant in New York absorbing the American culture, its English language, and *Weltanschauung* , who – in Act I – first defines the notion:

VERA So your music finds inspiration in America?
DAVID Yes – in the seething of the Crucible.
VERA The Crucible? I don't understand!
DAVID Not understand! You, the Spirit of the Settlement!
[*He rises and crosses to her and leans over the table, facing her.*]

Not understand that *America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming*! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand [*Graphically illustrating it on the table*] in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to – these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American. (Israel Zangwill, *The Crucible*, Act 1)[2]

It is the fusion of nationalities, races and cultures, all ready to melt into the cauldron of the new republic of the United States of America that the play insisted upon. It is worth noting that the concept was later challenged, and the late twentieth century theoreticians insist on the unity within diversity that characterizes the American cultural and ethnic landscape. The present day *Oath of Allegiance* – being a modernized form of the original adopted as early as 1778 – does not so much support the idea of 'the melting pot':

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

The melting-pot phenomenon made Americans out of millions of immigrants and their children, and in countless instances it produced outstanding Americans. It is worth mentioning the names of the eighteenth century slaves, Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano whose autobiographies, written in an attractive and captivating manner, contain their early expressed appeal to ban slavery. Briton Gammon relates his sufferings at sea, while John Marrant's narrative is full of fantasy and religious references, written in the picaresque tradition. It does not make very much for more than two centuries of slavery. The explanation is that the African American slave, legally set apart by black codes, and whose only reason for living was work from morning till night, did not give so much thought to conscious literary manifestations.

Most of the African American writers of the nineteenth century were either former slaves, or direct descendents of slaves. Their literary productions suggest a formal division into three distinct groups: autobiographies of escaped slaves, writings of preachers and of the clergy, and creative writings. The autobiographies of escaped slaves served to the political propaganda against slavery. The purpose governed everything: the subject matter, the style,

[2] The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Melting-Pot, by Israel Zangwill. Release Date: December 18, 2007 [EBook #23893]. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23893/23893-h/23893-h.htm>

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even the authorship of the work itself. Even authors were invented, when necessary. Unfortunately, all emotion which could have made an authentic African American work was eliminated, the language was purified by all African elements, by any traits of folk imagery: the institution of slavery was to be blamed, and not individuals. Uncle Tom was the model to be followed by all slaves in their narratives, with a stress upon the spiritual nobleness not yet spoiled by suffering, their Christian humbleness and piety, with the spirit of justice based upon their petty bourgeois wisdom and sensibility. Such narratives were meant to show that the African American slave was not only equal in value, but absolutely equivalent to the middle Euro-American citizen. Naiveté and sincerity were the only specific traits allowed, nothing *barbarian*, or *primitive*, or *pagan*. Nevertheless, such a brilliant writer such as Frederick Douglass (1817-1893), in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1845), proved qualities worthy of the highest consideration: objectivity, honesty, Christian humanism together with expressiveness, persuasion force, and stylistic mastery. One of the foremost spokesmen of the abolitionist movement, Douglass expressed the dichotomy experienced by his contemporaries:

> "On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us, its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting greedily upon our flesh. On the other hand, away back in the grim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain stood a doubtful freedom – half frozen – beckoning us to come and share her hospitality."

The "Narrative…" transcends the category of "slave narrative"; it is a self-conscious literary piece, an autobiography expressing the spirit of the age, sharing the concerns of the reformers and idealists of the day. In order to share the hospitality of the doubtful and half-frozen freedom man must be educated. Thus, the "Narrative…" is situated somewhere between David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), both authors representing opposed attitudes: the "father of the Negro revolt" vs. the "humblest man alive."

Before writing down their sermons, the African American preachers delivered them orally, in the Negro Churches which gradually became genuine popular churches, in which the Negro cultural heritage asserted itself at its best. These preachers created their own oratorical style, rich in imagery, and rhythm which was meant to strongly impress the audience. There is a strong fusion of Biblical and African elements in these sermons, the stronger the fusion, the greater the effect.

We have already hinted at the necessity of the African American novelist to achieve universality through a sensitive interpretation of his own culture. The originality consists in the cultural dualism experienced by this writer whose task is to be conversant with Western culture as a whole, especially with the tradition of the English literature of which he is a part, and at the same time to be prepared to exploit at full advantage his African cultural heritage, as a legitimate contribution to the larger culture. His deepest psychological impulses alternate between *assimilationism*, on the one hand, and *Negro nationalism*, on the other.

Defined by Langston Hughes as "the urge to whiteness within the race," assimilationism implies an incorporation of the white ideal, an unconscious urge to internalize the dominant cultural ideal, as well as an unconscious self-hatred. As Richard Wright puts it, "Hated by whites, and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in time to hate in himself what others hated in him." Thus, an unconscious desire to be white, coupled with feelings of revulsion towards the Negro masses may produce an assimilationist pattern of behavior at the purely personal level. Such an *urge to whiteness* proves to be a means of escape, a contrived absence of race consciousness and a belittling of estate barriers. By minimizing the color line, the assimilationist loses touch with the realities of Negro life and identifies with the group whose skin color is white. Therefore, assimilationism defines itself as a social-class phenomenon. The African American chooses as his model a middle-class

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white person, the European composers are preferred to the African American jazz, Baptism tends to be replaced by Episcopalianism, and the matriarchal family will be gradually replaced by the family of the dominant male. This tendency towards assimilationism is at the bottom a matter of changing one's reference group, an attempt to abandon ethnic ties and identify with the dominant appropriation of the dominant culture, including even its anti-minority prejudices.

Negro nationalism, as the popular opposite of assimilationism, can be conveniently defined as *an urge to blackness within the race*, which is essentially defensive in character. African Americans are drawn together by their common experience of racial oppression. Segregation creates the conditions of a separate group life, and the common heritage of slavery makes for a separate group tradition, hence a strong feeling of racial solidarity, a growth of race pride obvious in the African American's striving to rebuild what the whites have torn down. The most cohesive in-group attitude is not race pride, but a bitter hatred of whites. This anti-white sentiment provide the psychological impetus of Negro nationalism. The attitude towards all things white, negative in its essence, is accompanied by a positive valuation of blackness. As a militant movement, Negro nationalism stresses self-determination and resists integration into the dominant culture. Two main periods have been identified in the cultural history of the African American, beginning with folk art before the Emancipation of January 1, 1863, and becoming literary in the full sense about 1890.

Those years between 1863 and 1890 constitute the gestation period of the African American novelist. A strong inspirational emphasis reflects the desire of the so-called Talented Tenth to encourage ambition in the younger generation. A constant stress is placed on the property-acquired virtues: thrift and industry, initiative and perseverance, promptness and reliability. In the early novels these virtues are often reinforced by attitudes which derive from the Calvinist religion at work: a stern regard for duty, injunctions against idleness, sober warnings against self-indulgence. Most of the early novelists adopted a strict Protestant asceticism. As Pauline Hopkins put it, "We must guard ourselves against a sinful growth of any appetite."

As it grew in number and confidence, the Talented Tenth came to require of its members certain symbols of status, such as home ownership, higher education for children, membership in a selected religious denomination, symbols stressed by the early novelists in their novels. In addition to its inspirational function, the early African American novel served as an instrument of protest, through which the writers could express their grievances and appeal for justice. The early novelist was an advocate, pleading a cause. The novelists responded militantly to the post-Reconstruction repression, bringing every aspect of the caste system under attack.

Another outstanding feature of these novelists is their open contempt for the African American masses. They believed substantially in the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority. From their novels, as from their lives, the Talented Tenth sought to eliminate all traces of Negro-ness, in the hope that cultural uniformity would make them more acceptable to the whites. When the Talented Tenth became convinced of the necessity for independent struggle, only then was there an effort to close ranks with the Negro masses.

Bearing in mind the racial strategy of the Talented Tenth, as well as their success ideology, we find ourselves in the position to understand the dramatic structure of the early African American novel: the colored protagonist, usually as aspiring, respectable white-collar or respected person, is confronted by the American caste system acting as a handicap or obstacle to his ambition. The dramatic tension of the novel arises from this conflict between the success ideology of the hero and the inimical effects of the caste system.

The African American novelist arrived on the literary scene at a time when the Romantic tradition was rapidly being undermined by literary realism. But the early novelists wrote

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exclusively within the Romantic tradition, choosing melodrama as their main literary vehicle. They inherited another stock figure from their white predecessors in the person of the *tragic mulatto*. The novelists of the Talented Tenth were quick to incorporate this device into their own novels, for it was ideally suited to their current racial strategy. Through the figure of the tragic mulatto they could stress the irrational nature of caste, with the implication that the color bar should be lowered, at least for descendents of the dominant race.

The racial attitude of contemporary white novels inevitably affected the content of the early African American novel. Its form was derived from the popular fiction of the day. Why melodrama? Because it deals with the conflict between Right and Wrong. Its moral extremes make it a natural vehicle for racial protest, at it assumes the existence of a stable moral universe, made manifest through the perennial triangle: Hero (a handsome black man) – Heroine (a beautiful mulatto girl) – Villain (a white scoundrel). The moral absolutism of melodramas served the strategic needs of the period. By emphasizing action, melodramas avoid the problems of characterization. Caught between anti-Negro characters, melodrama relies on extrinsic devices to hold the reader's interest: exotic material from slavery times, such as mysteries of birth or lost inheritances, as well as plot materials which the whites preferred to ignore: miscegenation, passing-for-white, or racial violence. Above all else, melodrama is a literature of social aspiration. It has appealed, traditionally, to the white-collar classes. For them, melodrama is essentially a romantic projection of their future in the upper classes.

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