



RE-POSITIONING NEGRITUDE: THE DIALOGUE RESUMES!

WOLE SOYINKA'S LECTURE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE
AFRICA MONTH COLLOQUIA 2016

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SOWETO THEATRE, PRESS CLUB SA AND THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER



INTRODUCTION

Africa Month saw Soweto Theatre packed to capacity as the Department of Arts and Culture in conjunction with the African Independent Newspaper and Press Club SA hosted the last of the 2016 Africa Month Colloquiums that have been happening throughout the country to celebrate Africa Month. At the colloquium, the Nigerian winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature, Professor Wole Soyinka, took part in a discussion about “Politics, Culture and the New African”.

Speaker after speaker indicated that it was time Africans reclaimed their cultures and identities. Three leading African academics – including literary giant Wole Soyinka – took to the stage at the Soweto Theatre as the curtain came down on Africa Month celebrations.

Soyinka, South Africa’s Professor Muxe Nkondo as well as Professor Kole Omotoso addressed the final colloquium at the elegant and imposing venue on politics, culture and identity.

It formed part of a series of events hosted by Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa during the whole

“What is intolerable is anyone trying to suppress and diminish others’ contributions” Wole Soyinka

of May to mark the 53rd anniversary of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the precursor to the African Union (AU). Some of the highlights of the gathering included introductory remarks by Jovial Rantao, editor of African Independent; performances by Simphiwe Dana; a performance by Bealah Quartet, a Nigerian Isicathamiya group; and a question-and-answer session facilitated by Moshe Apleni, a young South African who is founder of Press Club SA.

In his address, Soyinka urged Africans to unite. He slammed Boko Haram for causing untold suffering in Africa through its reign of terror that had resulted in the deaths and displacement of thousands of Nigerians and the kidnapping of schoolgirls. Calling the group “barbarians at the gate”, Soyinka said Boko Haram was imposing its beliefs on others. “What is intolerable is anyone trying to suppress and diminish others’ contributions,” Soyinka said.

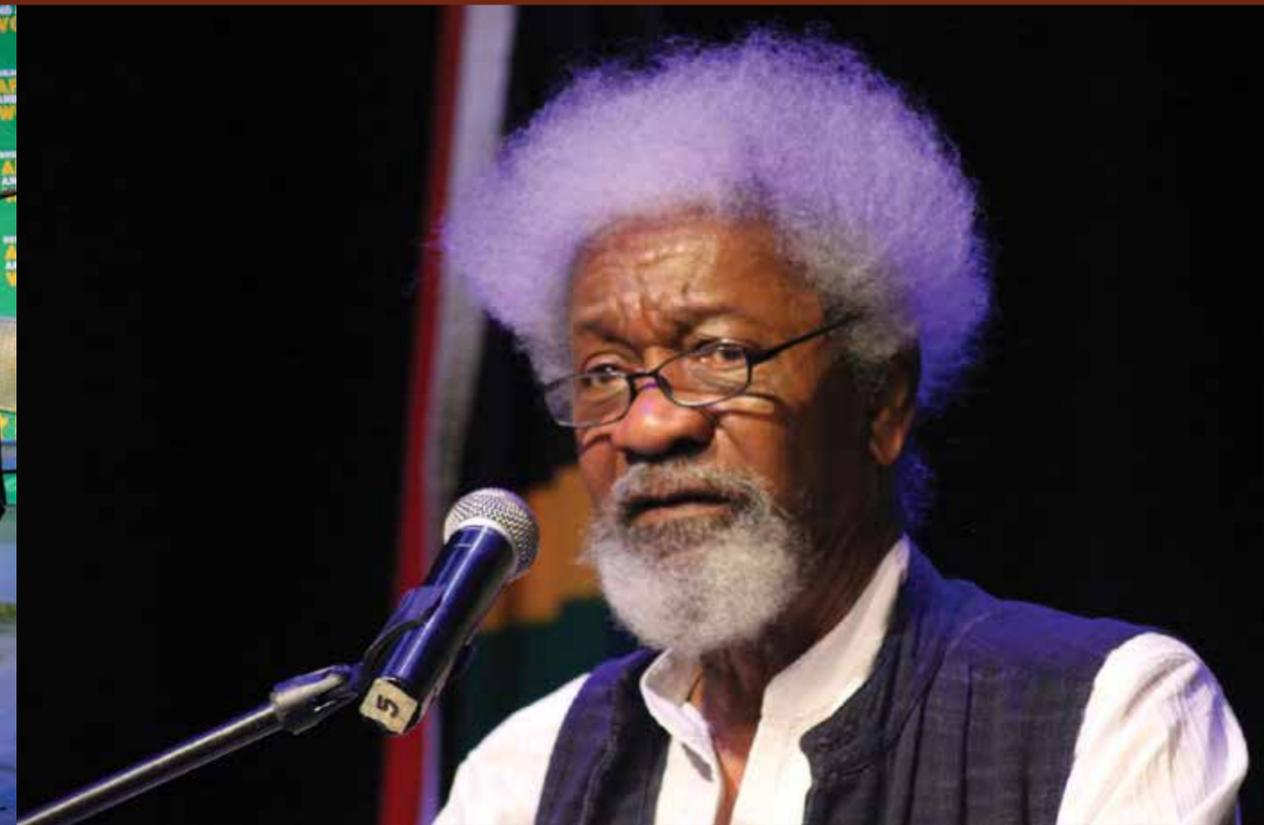
He said it was up to Africans to change the narrative of how the outside world viewed the continent. Nkondo praised Soyinka for his reflections on African solidarity. Describing him as Africa’s most prolific poet, he said Soyinka inspired “profound friendships in his quest to spread democratic citizenship across the borders”. Responding to a question from Soweto activist, Lesego Tau, Soyinka said it was high time African school curricula reflected the continent’s arts and cultures.

Minister Mthethwa said his department was working on “decolonising the literary space” in South Africa. He also confirmed that the Department of Basic Education was already working on incorporating African content in the curriculum. “We’re shaping our journey to our Africanness. [Basic Education] Minister Angie Motshekga has assured me that we are on the right path to knowing ourselves [as Africans],” he said.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE SOWETO THEATRE, PRESS CLUB SA AND THE AFRICAN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER



PHOTO CREDIT MAMBILE MAGEZA AND THE SOWETO THEATRE



WOLE SOYINKA

Akinwande Oluwole 'Wole' Babatunde Soyinka is an internationally celebrated Nigerian playwright, poet, author, teacher and political activist. In 1986, Soyinka became the first African to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Wole Soyinka, who is known for his criticism of Negritude: "a tiger does not have to proclaim his tigritude", recently discussed the subject at the Soweto Theatre in Johannesburg. His speech, entitled *RE-POSITIONING NEGRITUDE*, formed part of the Department of Arts and Culture's 2016 Africa Month Colloquia.

RE-POSITIONING NEGRITUDE: THE DIALOGUE RESUMES!

Permit me to begin by dedicating this lecture to three of our colleagues, now late, who dedicated their art to the rescue of humanity from perhaps the most deadly of all the plagues by which the world appears permanently assailed: Prejudice, no matter from which direction, faith, race, or gender. The threesome are Kofi Awoonor, the Ghanaian poet; Chenjerai Hove of Zimbabwe and, from this immediate terrain of our continent, Nadine Gordimer. Their passing reminds us that ultimately, we are nourished most profoundly by the pursuit of the harvest of imagination, otherwise, what a sterile, banal and predictable world! The choice of my field of discourse for this occasion stresses the fact that, especially for those of us who are bound together by the literary and other creative pursuits, issues of race are ultimately academic, despite the fact that they sometimes prove all engrossing. The problem of course is when, in real life, they become, literally, all-consuming. Then, even the source of inspiration begins to dry up under the frontal attack of Prejudice, and its extensions – bigotry and intolerance – requiring for their perpetuation, the enthronement of dictatorship, of total mind control and, remorselessly, a fatalistic disregard for the other, and a devaluation and degradation of our common humanity. These form only a part of the terrain of human struggle, of the eternal quest for a society based on a plurality of choices. Embedded along the way in the main body of my address is, I hope, a concern for this, a continuation of the writer's eternal mission in this case, an effort to re-state where the African mind has travelled along this trajectory. I have entitled it: *RE-POSITIONING NEGRITUDE: The Dialogue Resumes*.

Yes indeed, and necessarily so – **Re-positioning Negritude!** I can already see some of my listeners rushing for cover! Startled cries of disbelief resonate in literary circles across the continent, lacerating the Atlantic, shredding the Caribbean islands before bouncing back to echo from the rockhills of my hometown of Abeokuta in the land-mass of origin. The main quarry reads: did we hear right? Could this be the same 'rejectionist' voice of Mr Tigritude? I'm afraid it is, and his position remains the same



CHENJERAI HOVE

– well, more or less. Certainly the same as when Léopold Sédar Senghor and I last broached the subject during the celebrations of his 90th anniversary.

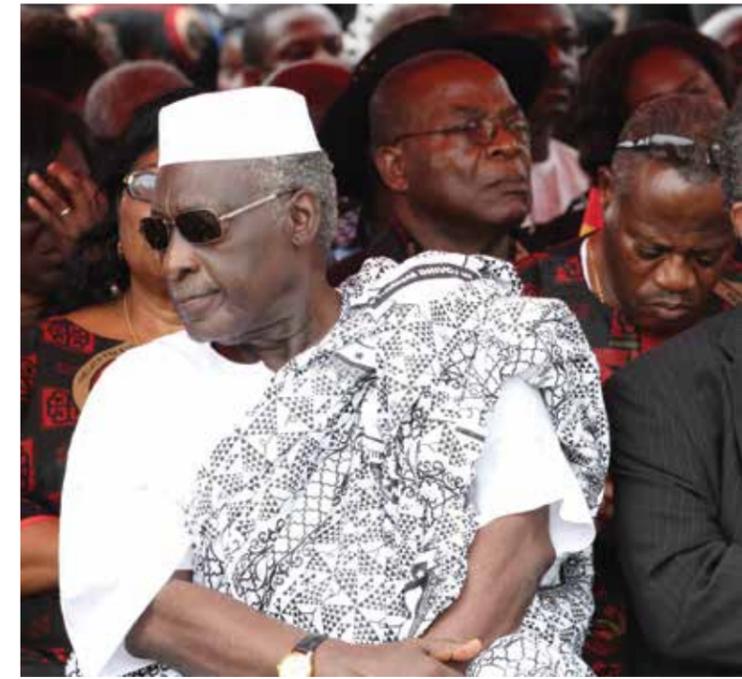
However, certain events have intervened in between the twilight years of that grand old Apostle of Negritude and the present of this continent. One of them is straightforward enough – a ritualistic undertaking. It is 50 years now since Senghor, poet but also a political leader, undertook a cultural convocation of this continent, and her children of the Diaspora, in Dakar – the First World Festival of Negro Arts, as it was named. The dispersed trooped in to join their relations at Source, to exchange notes on the artistic and intellectual production of the black race. It was a feast of history, memory and human creativity that was not only imaginative but propulsive. It sought directions. Of course that encounter was organised also to give flesh to the very concept of – Negritude. It was in anticipation of the anniversary that the scholar and documentarist,

Mathias Diawara of New York University produced a retrospective film titled *Soyinka and Senghor: A Dialogue*, which, I must now acknowledge, was the immediate catalyst of my present thematic choice. Inevitably the documentary induced nostalgia, but it also proved thought provoking. It induced a re-opening of some long discarded mental pages, even chapters.

Then, a few days afterwards, a yet understated event took place in North Africa, in Tunisia. We shall come to that event towards the end of our discourse. For now, let us remain within the cultural terrain.

That global first, the Negro Arts Festival, was unique in many ways but perhaps the most critical for us today was that it left the main question unanswered, that question being: what exactly is being black? Or the being of blackness? The 1966 banquet of art and ideas was itself openly pronounced by Senghor on the need to – I quote – “show evidence of the participation of Negritude in the universal civilization through the richness of Black Art.”

Break that project down in any directional pieces you wish and we find ourselves considering: What tributaries



KOFI AWOONOR

from black African values have flowed into the pool of universal civilization? What unique systems of beliefs? What differences of self-conceiving enable it to critique other cultures of the world and propose alternatives – and so on and on. In pursuing those considerations, the last part most critically of all in these present and menaced times, we are inevitably exercised by considerations of what ethical norms those black tributaries offer the human community.

Re-entering that phase of recollection, celebration and interrogation, that early post-independence prospect of a black African renaissance, I find myself pondering what Leopold Senghor and his protagonists of black African cultures would have made of the Negritude agenda today – an agenda which, we should recollect, was grounded on an innate African humanism, expressed before and since then under so many formulations – *The African Personality, Authenticité*, all the way to the most current – *UBUNTU*? So, how would the formulators of Negritude have responded to the dark watersheds of the continent's immediate past century: the brutality of civil wars with, among its unique horrors, the harvest of child soldiers who currently plague the continent, wiped clean of the most basic humane sensibilities, the curse of incontinent dictators and micro ultra-nationalisms that engender once unthinkable events like the Rwandan genocide, an event that still paralyses the mind with the clinical thoroughness of its pristine brutality or the eruption of xenophobia – triumphalist, fanatical



NADINE GORDIMER

and brutish against fellow Africans – in this very post-apartheid South Africa.

No, no claim is being made that these retrograde events were unique to the continent, nor that political leadership in that heady era, even up to the post-colonial phase, the 1960s – subscribed to the propositions of Negritude. Yet even those first-generation cultural nationalists, genuine, phony, or merely opportunistic, would be checked in stride today, I insist, and compelled to ponder what manner of African humanism has evolved that permits – just another current reminder – the abduction of 200-plus school children and their enslavement, for over two years in a forest redoubt, the perpetrators being none other than claimants to the divine mission of spiritual purification of the African soul.

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu, modern formulator of Negritude's sibling, Ubuntu, once visited the Holocaust Museum in Israel. He emerged, visibly moved, but recovered his voice sufficiently to voice the priestly response for a healing humanity: "But where is forgiveness in all this?" he sighed. One can reasonably project that the priest of Negritude, encountering today the butchered remains of over a hundred students in a citadel of learning in a Nairobi university campus would respond to that massacre of young minds with the lament: "But where is Negritude in all of this?" On further probing, and encountering the agenda – we dare not call it philosophy – of the hands that wreaked such carnage, the same cast of minds that abducted those Chibok school pupils, our rhapsodist of African womanhood would search in vain for his Muse of African humanism, now buried under the black shroud that the spiritual marauders of the black continent have decreed for the

complete depersonalisation of African womanhood – on pain of a hundred or more lashes, amputations, and even – death! Negritude appears to have met its match. Remember Senghor's famous paean to African womanhood? Let us savour some lines from that poem:

Naked woman, black woman

Clothed with your colour which is life,
with your form which is beauty!

In your shadow I have grown up; the
gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.

And now, high up on the sun-baked
pass, at the heart of summer, at the heart of noon,
I come upon you, my Promised Land,
And your beauty strikes me to the heart
like the flash of an eagle.

Naked woman, dark woman

Firm-fleshed ripe fruit, sombre raptures
of black wine, mouth making lyrical my mouth
Savannah stretching to clear horizons,
savannah shuddering beneath the East Wind's
eager caresses....

Oil that no breath ruffles, calm oil on the
athlete's flanks, on the flanks of the Princes of Mali
Gazelle limbed in Paradise, pearls are stars on the
night of your skin....

But what is the prospective fate of Senghor's Muse, the black African female today? If we wished to be sarcastic, we would say she is indeed transfigured into transcendental Negritude, since she is clothed in total blackness, which is invisibility itself, that was once the fate of the black slave – male or female – as captured in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Only now, of course the twenty-first century slave is just the black woman, as revealed in the theology of the al-Shabaab, the Boko Haram, the Ansar Dine and other would-be messengers of a new divinity hitherto unknown to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. These and their cohorts are the mental cripples of Dogma to which I earlier alluded, wading through blood in the garb of religious pietism. No of course, the continent of Negritude Africa has not yet reached the abyss of total subjugation, but the attempt is ongoing, at great cost to human lives, and black dignity.



BIRAGO DIOP

Nor does each frustrated attempt end in diminished checks. It merely goes into recession. It retreats into the accommodating body of a continent though the foot, re-appears in the knee and is soon encountered in the spine. It has begun to mount the head, for our impressionable youth are being weaned, thoroughly indoctrinated on the most pernicious doctrine of human separatism that the world has ever known since World War II.

Who, in 1966, would have thought that the heritage of African learning, so proudly on display in Dakar, preserved by dedicated families throughout Mali, would come to close to consummation in ashes, to join the rubble of architectural monuments raised by devoted hands to their sages – Islamic sages, we might like to note. Left strictly to the new spiritual ideologues, they would by now be mere wisps of an increasingly elusive past, to be sung perhaps by griots in secret caucuses, who in turn are fearful for their lives as the Purity Vigilantes patrol the streets in hunt for those we might call religious backsliders. Negritude reveres the ancients, instructs us on – indeed celebrates – the spirit that permeates all things and the continuum of mortal existence even through ancestral consciousness. At the first incursion of the new Spiritual Revivalists in Northern Nigeria and Mali, the ancestors have never known a moment of peace. How tedious, puerile, futile but fatal their antics must seem when instead, we listen to the sermon of Birago Diop:

Listen more often to things rather than beings.
Hear the fire's voice,
Hear the voice of water.

In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees,
It is our forefathers breathing.

The dead are not gone forever.
They are in the paling shadows,
And in the darkening shadows.
The dead are not beneath the ground,
They are in the rustling tree,
In the murmuring wood,
In the flowing water,
In the still water,
In the lonely place, in the crowd:
The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things rather than beings.
Hear the fire's voice,
Hear the voice of water.
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees.
It is the breathing of our forefathers,
Who are not gone, not beneath the ground,
Not dead.

The dead are not gone for ever.
They are in a woman's breast,
A child's crying, a glowing ember.
The dead are not beneath the earth,
They are in the flickering fire,
In the weeping plant, the groaning rock,
The wooded place, the home.
The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things rather than beings.
Hear the fire's voice,
Hear the voice of water.
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees.
It is the breathing of our forefathers.



THE #BRING BACK OUR GIRLS CAMPAIGN



MALI MONUMENT

That poem was born of Negritude. It encapsulates the spirituality of the continent. You can build a cathedral around it, a Grand Mosque, a Shinto shrine, a Buddhist temple and you will blaspheme against no known deity. You can dedicate any space of meditation on its threshold or within its community and you will sense within it, no matter your orientation, the animating spirit of human existence. It honours, not detracts from, the sum of the human phenomenon, and one can only wonder through what warped and perverse orientation its physical correlations evoke only nightmares in the minds of the destroyers of the Mali monuments.

When we speak of ancestry, Negritude invites us to think beyond the, literally, departed. We speak, think, and re-animate a heritage interwoven of both the producers of the present, the precipitates of our past, making us heirs and custodians, enriching us in a continuity of thought and productive existence that goes beyond physicality. If only these iconoclasts understood this, they would not so hate, there is no other word for it, the monuments that have survived as testaments to human intelligence and instruct us of an unbroken ancestry of human vitality – and of course we are not speaking of our continent alone but of depredations in other parts of the world – Palmyra, the ancient city of Nimrod in Iraq, the statues of Buddha in Afghanistan, all are bound together under Ubuntu – the bundle of humanity – and implicitly mandate a universal human responsibility. This is what Negritude has identified as Culture of the Universal.

Most immediate to us however, and pertinent – a gift of consciousness from ‘the Gathering of the Tribes of 1966 – was the extension of the cultural boundaries of the black world, and a jealous regard for its products – including the ancestral – cultures both expressed and merely understood, their physical extrusions from antiquity even without the naming. We are concerned by threats to, but also by, their existence, if we claim to be beings of reason. This implies that we must not shy from confronting even the possibility that such actualities, the meanings ascribed to them, or their continuing undialectical retentions constitute the greatest threat to their value and relevance in a modern world – that is **our** responsibility, the responsibility, primarily, of heirs to such heritage, not that of outside marauders no matter what creed they espouse or their claims to ultimate, absolutist and inviolable truths. We must seek ours, and without the instrumentality of coercion. We must seek what marches in consonance with our own identified goals and vision for the future. If Negritude has meaning



PHILLIS WHEATLEY STATUE, BOSTON

and significance today, it rests within that latter pulse of its dialectic that springs from the black particular to the solidarity of the universal. The particular is not to be understated. It is not only human, but is objectively valid. First, we seize upon what is ours, then we respond to what is shared with others, especially within the extended family of kin and kind.

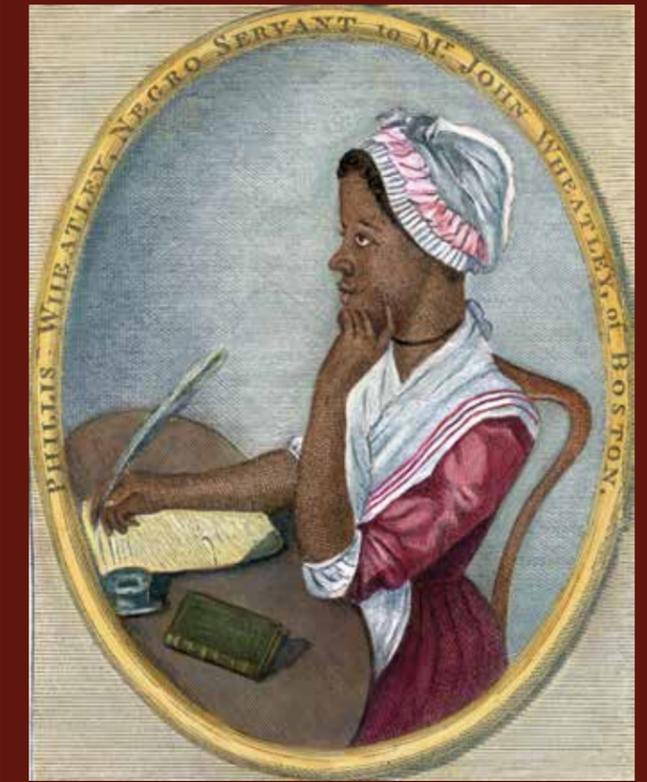
For instance, no sooner do we learn of descendants of the black race in Iraq than our minds spring to alert, and next into action. Who were the Zanj? How did they succeed for nearly two decades in holding a powerful caliphate at bay and maintaining their autonomy? What is their present social condition? Do they consider themselves African? It is an issue of both instinct and intellectual curiosity. Humanity always seeks to know or else we cease to be human. Identity therefore is basically secondary – it is denial of identity that often constitutes enemy action, and by denial, we are speaking of the denial of those properties we feel define us, even when not given a name. That is the reality of Negritude, each seeks his or her own meaning within a construct of recognisable or arguable properties. Let us say, for instance, that on this continent in which we have lived, created and re-created our social existence, a gang of reformers insist that our hands must be amputated because of a handshake with the opposite sex, any sense of dignity compels us to consider it an attack on our identity, to which the word Negritude just happens to be applied.

This continent has bred poets, singers, thinkers, social builders and nurturers who happened to be

women, even warriors. The history of women rulers, or powerful, influential women is not as rare as many imagine – Nigeria or Ghana alone can provide enough material to preoccupy an entire generation of doctoral students. A diminution of their existence, valuation, or simply – knowledge – merely diminishes us in turn, and undermines our claim to rationality. It degrades that non-exclusionist network of sensibilities into which the concept Negritude serves merely as a verbal signifier. It is so simple, and the responsibilities cannot be shrugged off. The unnamed precursors of Negritude that tie us to distant lands, such as Phillis Wheatley, the slave poet from Senegambia, invite us to ask: how does Negritude in its relevance – if any – defend today’s stay-at-home kith and kin of Phillis Wheatley at the hands of irredentists to whom learning is a crime that can only be assuaged by public beheading as a lesson to others, and perhaps the execution of her parents who flouted the will of an unknown deity by sending her to school? Yes, it is with these early ambassadors and promulgators of the African creative verve that indemnify Negritude in its past and unforeseeable trajectory.

Negritude is of course whatever we choose to make of it, even as the human personality, which may be rooted in the accident of birth, but ultimately receives shape and form from the exercise of that volition that is bequeathed to every human being, irrespective of race, faith or gender. Ask the poets, not even of the time of Phillis Wheatley’s recognition in her own right, but centuries before her, the traditional griots. For what the Boston worthies who put Phillis Wheatley to the test of European letters did not understand was that her genius did not commence on her access to the library of her Bostonian owner who happened to be of a liberal disposition: her genius was innate in her from the land of the griots, that breed of lyrical custodians of history and epic which, though predominantly male, made the occupation open to both male and female. It must sometimes strike some of us, surely, as a grotesque irony, that a section of our humanity might prefer to be re-enslaved, in order to attain the freedom all humanity so desperately craves.

Yes, the griots of earlier times and different climes speak with the authority of our ancestors, and call our attention to the Phillis Wheatleys of our times who are still lost in the Sambisa Forest of north-eastern Nigeria, condemned to a fate of mass sexual enslavement by those whose mission is, they claim, to save the African soul from perdition. How does Negritude under any other name, the product and construct of a history of racial disdain, respond to such contemporary enslavement? Is



PHILLIS WHEATLEY

it troubling perhaps that, in Negritude, we should have made flesh what was largely a conceptual banner that would, by now, be so finely honed, that it would have stopped the neo-barbarians of our continent in their track? How ironic it is that, on the one hand, the learned Boston literati only found it difficult to believe that a mere slave girl could have composed sonnets in the metre of Dante or Shakespeare while today’s culture commissars led by black wannabe sages – Ansar Dine perhaps, or al-Shabaab – simply eliminate that little problem of creative genius by lopping off the head that houses it, to ensure that she never composes or articulates even that basic, simple pop affirmation lyric:

*Say it loud/ I’m black and proud.
Say it loud/ I’m black and proud*

She had better play it mute, and humble!

We have indeed progressed in terms of race pride since Phillis Wheatley, who was, by the way, not entirely, and unqualifiedly *black and proud*, being mostly simply black and learned. But the learned today had better beware. Male or female, the learned have joined the endangered species. The sworn terminators of learning are on rampage, and that book in your pocket could be your death warrant. If you doubt it, study how Boko Haram commenced its

career with tertiary institutions of learning, succeeded in closing them down after selective slaughtering, slashed its way down the ladder of enlightenment till it arrived at the very foundation level of the learning process, slitting the throats of school pupils. It extended its reign of interdiction by visiting the crimes of the young pupils on their parents who were guilty of failing to heed their order that children be kept from schools...and so hectare by hectare, the north-eastern states of Borno, Adamawa, became wastelands of learning, a broadening desertification that rapidly made inroads into southward states – Plateau, Kaduna...until even the Nigerian capital, Abuja came close to becoming part of the front-line states in the battle for humanistic survival.

That sense of irony persists. Religion has merely replaced race – or perhaps, more accurately, pseudo-religion. In reality, it all has to do with power – political power that feels threatened by the intellectual upliftment of the underling. At least, the Wheatley companions of that era could recant – under menace of less tolerant slave owners – if they found themselves under threat for being on the right side of enlightenment. They could feign illiteracy. Their successors are not even permitted to plead or plea bargain – they are doomed beforehand. If you have seen the film *12 Years A Slave* or read the book from which that film derived, you would be astonished how history continues to play the victim race foul. It was dangerous then for a slave to be caught with a book, much less admit to the ability to read one. Three centuries later, an even deadlier replay on their continent of origin, a new set of slave masters sprout up right in the heartland of the black race. So indeed, what price Negritude? Or, more combatively, what role Negritude?

Negritude has never left African humanity. Even in the Diaspora, the time-line commences long before the era of Phillis Wheatley, on whom, for partisan reasons that I hope are obvious, I deliberately focus upon. However, that phase of ambiguous identity, timorous, that would have to wait a few more centuries for the conceptual affirmation that you and I now take for granted, debate and critique, has remained available for summoning as an insurgent weapon. This female poet however led the way in black America's literary recognition, despite her apologetic cultural relations with her enforced milieu – white and racist – evident in the ambiguity of some of her poetry and pronouncements. Nonetheless, her output was also injected with the rare poetry of a fierce, racial pride. I refer to that phase of ambiguity that basically apologised for her racial origin – conceded by her to be crude, savage,

and heathen, while she remained full of praise and thanksgiving for the redemptive incident that brought her both to the enlightenment of Christianity and European civilisation. If we approach her intellectual development by concentrating on those poems of hers where she recovers and advertises the validity, even the vitality, of her original being, we could claim that, in her, we have already encountered the literary mother of Negritude.

There are times when any people with the slightest self-respect must remind themselves who they are, must recollect their antecedents and renovate their authentic being. When the core of that collective being is threatened, it is normal to draw a protective barrier around their existence, even if it is no more than symbolic. And there of course we have numerous choices. We can glamorise antecedence, spin stories around, invent or refurbish a romantic past. We can adopt the combative mode that simply warns denigrators to keep off, or surge outwards from the protective perimeter to do combat. Many in-between strategies are to be found within all extremes. As we say in Yoruba however, in the hour of hunger, even infants know the way to their mother's breasts. So, let us transfer from the Phillis Wheatley model for now and move time-wise forward to a century of much less ambiguity – just a quick overview – to remind us that “Negritude” – again under whatever name – has never been of one static coloration, nor its expressions, including practical manifestations, limited to a single literary or political strategy.

From Phillis Wheatley then to the idyllic model, those poets who assist us with the roll-call of heroes and the grandeur of origin. Some of them were also conscious seekers, poets such as Countee Cullen whose idyllic image of Africa had already begun to contest the picture of the barbaric origin that was conceded by our Wheatley, the harvest of planted seeds and environment of the captors and enslavers of their forebears. Rejection now takes over, leading to both the conjuration of a wished-for idyll, and reinforced by a critique of the oppressor's claims of spiritual superiority:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea
Jungle star or jungle track
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sang
When the birds of Eden sang?

The poet of those lines, Countee Cullen follows up with imagic amplification of this lost Eden of valour,

interjecting pejorative comparisons with an actual, resented situating, one that is now portrayed in the language of resented alienation, including total rejection of a supposedly transforming, but self-contradicting religion. As you see, we have never really been freed from that tussle for the black soul, it appears, right from the earliest rudimentary encounters with foreign religions – both in their malevolent and seemingly benign personalities. Count Cullen picks up the torch where it was dropped by Phillis Wheatley, but the once barely flickering flame has begun to scorch:

So I lie, who find no peace
Night and day, no slight release
From the unremitant beat
Made by cruel padded feet
Walking through my body's street

Even his conversion, Cullen's apparent embrace of the Euro-Christian deities is made an issue of deliberate dubiety:

My conversion came high-priced
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of humility:
Heathen gods are naught to me
Father, Son and Holy Ghost
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black.....

Lord, I fashion dark gods too

Thus declares Countee Cullen long in advance of René Depestre, the poet who, in my essay in *The Muse Of Forgiveness* I describe as one of the unforgiving bards of Negritude. The difference, of course, is that Rene Depestre did not need to make that epic leap of the imagination into the remembered past – he has those gods already at his fingertips and he invokes them to take vengeance on the traducers of his race. The fire of rejection, of rebellion was already lit a century ahead of Aimé Césaire himself, ahead of Depestre and others of the combative, unforgiving arc of Negritude. Countee Cullen's prayer for the cooling of the embers of rebellion is not so much an address to a remote deity as it is a warning to an insensitive, racist society that denies him his authentic being:



COUNTEE CULLEN HEADSTONE

Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed....
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the dryest flax
Melting like the merest wax
Lest the grave restore its dead

Despite Countee Cullen's deadbeat metres – a reflection of the metrical tradition of the time – this is Rene Depestre and the battle cry of Negritude before its time, warning, asserting, invoking the power of the ancestors and the ancestral deities to join and do battle in repudiation of a culture of racial disdain. It is useful to remain conscious of these antecedents that did not wrap around themselves the banner of Negritude but stemmed from an identical impulse of black assertion just the same. This temporal perspective enables us to understand that nothing abnormal or contrived took place in the cafe sidewalks or student garrets of the Parisian metropolis, when, in the early 1920s – that is, effectively a full century ago, a group of young African and Caribbean students came together to begin discussions of the black race in a white-dominated world, decided to commence a journal that would impress upon that world an ancient and historically validated reality and, in the process, re-assert themselves as the heirs of that reality. The world into which slaves and descendants of slaves had been crudely thrust was compelled to listen to voices – from within – of the children of disdain articulating a different run of images



AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

from what the apologists of slavery and next, colonialism had conferred on them....

Strong bronzed men; regal black women; tall defiant grass; great drums throbbing through the air; dark blood.... like great pulsing tides of wine; bodies sleek and wet/ dripping mingled rain and sweat; savage measures; primal measures; dark gods....dark rebellious hair..... just loosen up the metric fixities of these early black troubadours operating in a foreign language and you discover that they are the precursors of the Senghorian cadences that would entrance us a century later, fleshing out the primal cry of Negritude:

From that close to revolutionary cry of Countee Cullen – *lest a hidden ember set/timber that I thought was wet/ burning....* the rhetorical question that subversively defined black identity would be – not so much celebrated as – echoed and amplified in the conscious literary mission of Aimé Césaire, Birago Diop, Léon Damas, Nicolás Guillén and dozens of other poets, forging a self-constitutive tool that would, with increasing aggressiveness, interrogate the assumptions of the white world.

It is the tradition in which the latter generation of black American writers – LeRoi Jones – later Amiri Baraka – Haki Madhubuti, Maya Angelou, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez and other poets of Black Consciousness pitched their tent with increasingly revolutionary fervour. Not surprisingly, a school of Caribbean historians even takes the view that Negritude found its earliest expression in Haiti, in the revolt of

the slaves – that Dessalines, Toussaint L'Ouverture and their comrades-in-arms were the true midwives of Negritude. The history of the Caribbean is replete, not merely with slave revolts, but with attempts to set up black independencies, organised on the socio-political principles that the slaves had known in their own societies, sometimes including kingship systems from the African continent. And of course, religion. The tenacity of African religious systems in countries like Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, with their *Candomblé*, *bembe drums* and *Santería* is also designated Negritude in its deepest sense, since it is a manifestation of the spiritual attachments of a people.

To summarise Negritude in action: two major tendencies have been manifested during its long career. One direction is what we might call the purist tendency. On the terrain of physical manifestations, we may illustrate this through the separatist movement of those slaves – such as the Maroons of Jamaica – who fled into the mountains and laboured to preserve the cultures, mores and traditions of their recollected African society in its pristine – as recollected – condition. The intellectual heirs of that predisposition will be found, firstly during the Harlem Renaissance of the early 1910s and '20s, of which Alain Locke remains the most prominent voice, with Langston Hughes, Claude McKay (of the militantly famous "*If We Must Die*"), Zora Neale Hurston, and was precursor to the American black movement of the 1960s, the theorists of black revolution such as Haki Madhubuti, Ron Karenga etc. – and of course the already cited Leroi Jones in his own black consciousness stage – all of whose cultural manifestos would sometimes declare that the African peoples had nothing to gain even from mere adaptation of European mores and values but must seek their own salvation in a return to authentic African values and ethical systems. This uncompromising stance finds a truly extreme advocacy in the words of the literary theorist, Larry Neal who declared:

"The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalised or destroyed, and we will possibly find that even radicalisation is impossible. In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas"

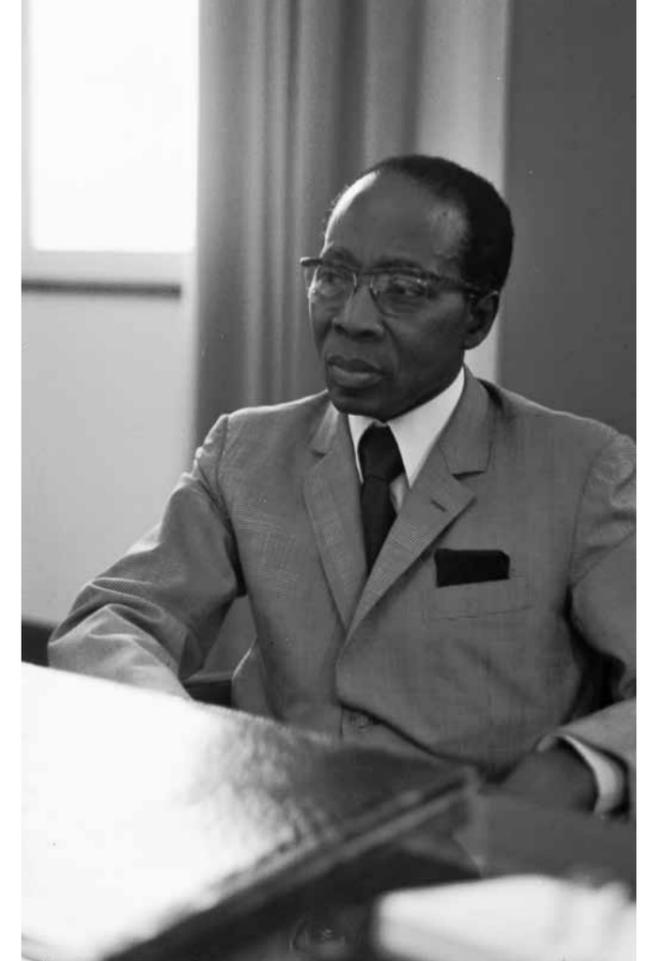
The second tendency is the assimilationist, one that foresees the motion towards integration, or syncretism, as the logical end of cultural identities. The religious fate of African worship on arrival in the New World may be cited as the palpable representation of this tendency, one that would be so passionately advocated in the preponderant proportion of the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor. But then, we discover that sooner or later, even

the theorists of the purist line appear to mellow into the vision of the syncretic fate of the two cultures – black and white, African and western, Christian and traditional African, and indeed, into a gospel of the inevitability of a process of the dialogue of cultures, without actually preaching a universalism that would sound the death-knell of unique identities. We can use the *Santería* as the perfect illustration of this tendency, as well as the poetry, music and literature that have sprung up from this African world of the Diaspora – Abdias do Nascimento (his plays at least), Pepe Carril, Nicholas Guillén, Derek Walcottand the *Santería*.

Léopold Sédar Senghor is of course the prominent exemplar of what, in effect, is a dialectical process of the cultural dialogue. After an initial separatist discourse – one which laid a basis for a distinct black culture in opposition to the European, where Senghor would sometimes find himself bracketed with the more militant Negritudinists – Aimé Césaire, Leon Damas and René Depestre – Senghor would become an advocate of the intermarriage of racial essences and cultures – the black leaven as infusion into the materialist, metallic white world, bringing with it its spiritual and humanistic values. These values are mostly represented as the art of spontaneity, intuition as opposed to calculating rationality, those societies where Nature is given scant recognition.

Perhaps no poem of Senghor propels this visionary exhortation with greater passion and rhetorical lilt than *New York*, a poem I have described elsewhere as a *tour de force* of leaping metrification, a sequence of pulsation of breathlessness and pause, built on the recitative tradition that is encountered virtually in all of West Africa. In Yoruba, we recognise Senghor's lines a tradition known as *rara*, the epic and praise-singing branch of poetry. Indeed, it is when read aloud – and this is one undeniable character of most of Senghor's poetry – when read aloud even in translation, that one is swept off by the *Africanness* of these poems, no matter if the language of declamation is French or English, Wolof or Serer. That fact also, the exploitation of a language that is a fusion of both colonial reality and creative choice, is one that should be borne in mind in assessing Senghor's commitment to the potential accommodation between cultures, towards the language of a universal humanism. Here follow a few lines from that poem:

New York! At first I was bewildered by your beauty,
Those huge, long-legged, golden girls.
So shy, at first, before your blue metallic eyes and icy smile,
So shy. And full of despair at the end of skyscraper streets



LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR

Raising my owl eyes at the eclipse of the sun.
Your light is sulphurous against the pale towers
Whose heads strike lightning into the sky,
Skyscrapers defying storms with their steel shoulders
And weathered skin of stone.
But two weeks on the naked sidewalks of Manhattan –
At the end of the third week the fever
Overtakes you with a jaguar's leap
Two weeks without well water or pasture all birds of the air
Fall suddenly dead under the high, sooty terraces.
No laugh from a growing child, his hand in my cool hand.
No mother's breast, but nylon legs. Legs and breasts
Without smell or sweat. No tender word, and no lips,
Only artificial hearts paid for in cold cash
And not one book offering wisdom.
The painter's palette yields only coral crystals.
Sleepless nights, O nights of Manhattan!
Stirring with delusions while car horns blare the empty hours
And murky streams carry away hygienic loving
Like rivers overflowing with the corpses of babies.

A creative, literary affirmation, like a suspension bridge, whose properties it shares in numerous ways, most especially, a tensive space of encounters, not a resolution or arrival at destination.



PHOTO CREDIT MAMBILE MAGEZA AND THE SOWETO THEATRE

SIMPHIWE DANA PERFORMED AFTER THE LECTURE

So, there we have the two major tendencies – integration or syncretism – or at least mutual accommodation, as represented by the Santería on the one hand, and purist isolationism as symbolised by the Maroons, the Garveyite Back-to-Africa movement, plus quite a handful of yet surviving, near-cultic affirmation of separatist, consciously ghetto cultures and anti-European establishment movements such as the Rastafarians.

What is common, between both the accommodative tendency, and the purist Nay-sayers of Negritude, is that any movement towards an egalitarian encounter ‘between cultures’ is predicated upon a full seizure of a precedent position from ‘within culture’, whatever culture is involved. In practical terms, an inventory of the culture that takes on the other, either in opposition or in complementarity, a demand that is instigated by the centuries-old inequality of encounters, often based on violence. By the same token, both Negritude and Tigritude – in both poetry and theory – must at least engage in a reasonably objective assessment of just what values constitute the black creative persona and have shaped its history. Then the questions: are those values trapped and frozen for all eternity in tradition, requiring that we consign ourselves to occupying the province of archaeologists and anthropologists?

Or are these dynamic values that constantly evolve, informing the very transformation of society and responding – where relevant – to the multiple faces of an exterior, and evidently non-static world? Do we seek out and seize upon only those values that appear immutable and unchanging, those values only that have no replication elsewhere, or do we accept the correspondences that exist between all cultures, at some level or the other, through all eras since the history of mankind may be held to have commenced.

In this season of stocktaking, after the chastening lessons of Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and of course, Rwanda – yes, Rwanda most especially – it is only natural that we engage in a rigorous reconsideration of prior valuations of those virtues that were supposed to go into the foundation of this cultural philosophy of self-liberation called Negritude and its offshoots – or indeed precedents. It is necessary also that, even while locating Negritude in a precise decade, we demystify its claim to primacy – in reality, Negritude is a project of multiple reincarnations – the African Personality, Authenticité, Nommo, Muntu, the African Renaissance, pan-Africanism, Ujamaa. Even Kwanza, the young festival of black cultures inaugurated by our kinsfolk in the United States, is simply Negritude writ current



PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA KISSES AUTHOR AND POET MAYA ANGELOU AFTER AWARDING HER THE 2010 MEDAL OF FREEDOM DURING A CEREMONY IN THE EAST ROOM OF THE WHITE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON IN 2011

and – we must comment – writ Big Business, these days. Just like Christmas among the Christians. Or Easter. And of course, one of the latest cultural rallying words – UBUNTU, sometimes defined as a distillation of traditional mores that is distinctly African, and from whose ethical principles even the project of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission is held to have benefited.

So, finally, UBUNTU! Can Ubuntu – that is, Negritude re-vivified, put to service – when the current angels of darkness are routed, their myrmidons permanently ossified, will UBUNTU emerge as facilitator of the healing process through some form of Truth and Reconciliation? Like it or not, we must think ahead. Can any system of belief, of ancestral wisdom, historical findings or ethics propose a structure of reconciliation with what our humanity has endured in the recent past few years under the rampage of movements like Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, Ansar Dine and their global allies of mindless nihilists, the Da’esh, also known by the self-flattering name of ISIS and ISIL? Should there be any such approach? Does the world deserve the arbitration of any such level of abuse and degradation of human sensibility and meaning? And by meaning, I do mean – whatever constitutes the meaning of social man in this twenty-first century. Its

attributes. It is possible that the last service of Negritude to humanity will be to assist us in re-defining humanity.

I have a sound reason to make such a claim. Others have defined humanity, even to the extent of excluding a large swathe of the world – the black race – from seizure of what is human, thus justifying the enslavement of that race with all the atrocities that accompanied it. It is justly the turn of that race to define humanity, and the virtue of Source from which Negritude emerged is that no pronouncement of its entire career – polemic or fiction – has judged humanity on the basis of skin or origin. Negritude therefore suffers from no negative baggage and should thus be unafraid to pronounce upon what others shy from. Negritude may, for instance, affirm that there are certain acts, certain theologies, certain catechisms which exclude their upholders from the species that can be called human. Historically, the manglers of humanity and other sanguinary servitors of religion have been among the towering candidates for that exclusion list. From time to time however, a people wake up from a long history of spiritual delusion. Others prefer to slither over the congealed blood of thousands and hundreds of thousands on their way to perdition, which they insist on calling illumination, enlightenment, or salvation.



LANGSTON HUGHES

Among the truly saved, indeed leading the throng once again – and to bring us back to the thematic reference point I left suspended at the beginning is – Tunisia. It was, let us recollect, that commenced what has become known as the Arab Spring, only this time, we shall call it – Humanity’s Spring. It is thanks to Tunisia yet again that the African continent, the home of Negritude, offers itself as the cradle of a new awakening. I have in mind its recent convulsion – and I use that word deliberately, since convulsion is what it is when taken side by side with the profound, yet largely ignored teachings of African deities, custodians of the pulsating heart of Negritude, its poetry and social philosophy, grounded in the only world we know – the secular, in contrast to the theocratic. It is from that mesh of social and spiritual sensibilities that we can extract a non-doctrinaire, verifiable, yet innately incontestable wisdom and make it seep through to prior claimants to the monopoly, and absolutism of spiritual truths. Failure to absorb, and entrench these truths in the community of man has cost humanity centuries of humanistic retrogression. A breach has been made however, a breach that is a convulsion,

yet unfelt in critical time. Nonetheless, that wisdom, and the courage to pronounce it, to act upon it, moves to supersede centuries of blindness. I once articulated that wisdom thus, and will remain within it:

“Black Africa can boast of never having undertaken a war – a jihad or crusade in the promotion of its spiritual extractions and religious world-views.”

It has taken a while, but the politics of humanity appears to be stumbling towards the implications of that wisdom from Africa’s pre-colonial, indeed timeless reality. When I turned on the news on my television set in Oslo barely a week ago (May 2016) and watched the leader of a ruling party – Rached Ghannouchi, declare that his Gianadda party had resolved to separate Religion from Politics, setting the tone for yet another era of seismic changes in the Arab world, I could only nod in satisfaction. Come what may, Negritude has touched the soul of Tunisia. The rest – to drastically adapt a familiar saying – the rest approves – history! It is indeed Spring time for humanity.

WOLE SOYINKA



THAMI NGUBENI AND
PROF. WOLE SOYINKA

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THAMI NGUBENI AND
PROF. KOLE OMOTOSO

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who all day long
Want no sound except the song
Sung by wild barbaric birds
Goading massive jungle herds,
Juggernauts of flesh that pass
Trampling tall defiant grass
Where young forest lovers lie,
Plighting troth beneath the sky.
So I lie, who always hear,
Though I cram against my ear
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
Great drums throbbing through the air.
So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood dammed within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
Channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret.

An extract from *Heritage* by Countee Cullen



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