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Homage to Michel Fabre

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# Cultural Hybridity and Existential Crisis in Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*

Marc Mvé Bekale

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- 1 In a letter sent to Michel Fabre in 1964, Léopold Sédar Senghor wrote about Richard Wright:

His whole life and work tend to be the proof that he was a torn man, very much like me, all things considered. A man torn between the past and the future of his race, between the values of Négritude and those of European civilization.<sup>1</sup>

- 2 That Senghor identified himself with Richard Wright is particularly revealing in the sense that Senghor's personal trajectory epitomizes the intellectual journey of the postcolonial subject. In many ways, Richard Wright's literary works of the 1950s fit into the philosophical, cultural and political agenda of the Négritude writers who were trying to redefine the Western conception of Reason and Being through the assertion of the Negro cultural values. Discussing the substance of *The Outsider* with Paul Reynolds, his literary agent, Wright stated:

The break from the U.S. was more than a geographical change. It was a break with my former attitudes as a Negro and a communist—an attempt to think over and redefine my attitudes and my thinking. I was trying to grapple with the big problem —the problem and meaning of Western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it.<sup>2</sup>(my emphasis)

- 3 It seems that the “big problem” Wright set out to explore in *The Outsider* forms the nexus of African literature of the 1950s and 1960s. For the emerging African elite, those years were marked by cultural and existential insecurity as African countries, transitioning from European colonies to modern states, had to broker new cultural values. *The Outsider* is filled with echoes of this historical mutation, which had forced the Third World people

“to leave their tribal, ancestral anchorages of living by being sucked into the orbit of industrial enterprises”<sup>3</sup>.

- 4 Elsewhere, I have argued that the term “anchorage”, a central metaphor in Wright’s fiction, is invested with ontological and psychological meaning since it translates the Negro’s quest for his historically negated humanity<sup>4</sup>. The notion of “anchorage” is then an instantiation of Frantz Fanon’s concept of “disalienation”. An avid reader of Wright’s literature, Fanon saw in the tragic destiny of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* an eloquent expression of “the existential deviation” white oppression has imposed on the Negro as well as a struggle against the “inessentiality of servitude” to which the Negro race has been confined since its encounter with European civilization<sup>5</sup>. Wright initiated the dialectics of “disalienation” with the publication of “Big Boy Leaves Home”, a story about a Negro boy’s traumatic confrontation with racism in the South. The racial fears instilled in Big Boy find a psychotic outlet in *Native Son* whereas *The Outsider* attempts to transcend those irrational fears by raising philosophical questions about human freedom. The evolution of Wright’s heroes, from Big Boy to Cross Damon, reflects strikingly the moral and psychological experience of contemporary African intellectuals, most of whom go through a painful process of “Westernization” in order to realize themselves.
- 5 Building on the theoretical perspective of postcolonial hybridity, I will examine the spiritual odyssey of black intellectual characters in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’aventure ambiguë*. I will discuss two different categories of hybridity: the creative or transcendental form of hybridity theorized by Homi K. Bhabha as the “Third Space of enunciation” of identity<sup>6</sup> and the pathological hybridity that rather paralyzes the self and is best exemplified in African literature by Samba Diallo, the protagonist of *L’aventure ambiguë*. Slightly departing from Bhabha’s line of thinking, I will consider the Negro’s hybridization in connection with the problems of alienation and existential angst.
- 6 The notion of hybridity is historically loaded. Initially associated with miscegenation and impurity, it was introduced in the postcolonial discourse to challenge the essentialist models of culture and identity. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha has made it a major concept allowing him to reject the validity of any idea based on cultural authenticity. For Bhabha, the social reality of hybridity translates into a liminal space or “Third Space” wherein complex forms of identities are formulated:
 

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity.<sup>7</sup>
- 7 Bhabha’s argument resonates with Stuart Hall’s view that identity, far from being a fixed essence, is experienced in terms of “dispersal and fragmentation,” historical and cultural positioning:
 

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>8</sup>

- 8 *The Outsider* and *L'aventure ambiguë* offer interesting perspectives on the question of identity as a constant negotiation and re-enunciation of self. These novels stage two black intellectual characters who find themselves trapped by the ideological and moral forces of their social environment. As we follow Cross Damon and Samba Diallo in their adventures, we realize that these forces are related to the dialectics of displacement, which leads to the dislocation of their individuality. As for *The Outsider*, it should be underlined that thirteen years after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright made it clear that he wanted to move beyond racial issues to confront the world with a new vision of man. While Bigger Thomas was the product of American racial politics, Cross Damon on the contrary is portrayed as a symbol of the modern fragmented individual who thinks that man is “nothing in particular”<sup>9</sup>. Such a vision was caused by Wright’s disillusionment with the foundational values of Western societies, the evolution of which has resulted in “a kind of war against mankind”<sup>10</sup>. *The Outsider* then represents a new dimension in the development of Wright’s literature. Having written bitter novels indicting American racism, Wright was now trying to create a literary space through which he could translate and articulate his post-racial idealism.
- 9 In much the same way, the quest for new values informs *L'aventure ambiguë*. Kane’s novel, now a classic African text, raises fundamental questions about the nature of African independence, both culturally and politically. The story unfolds in colonial times and we first meet Samba Diallo as a young man caught between two axiological systems. Samba Diallo must navigate the Islamic spirituality of his native Diallobé country and liberal Western ideas. When Samba Diallo migrates to Paris to pursue his studies in philosophy he ends up voicing scepticism about his identity. In various ways, Samba Diallo’s experience at school and university calls to mind Cross Damon’s enrollment in a philosophy class at university, a choice he made not for practical use of knowledge but for an abstract understanding of the meaning of life. As displaced individuals, both characters are struggling to make sense of the materialistic ethics of Western society. This may account for their interest in philosophy though their constant involvement with metaphysical issues deepens their existential wounds, leaving them with the tragic sense of nothingness. Indeed, the insight they acquire from their spiritual search does not open any doors to them other than those of solitude and dereliction. Samba Diallo’s exposure to Western values prompts him to question the traditions that used to cement his being. In Paris, he explains to his friends:
- I am not a distinct country of the Diallobé facing a distinct Occident, and appreciating with a cool head what I must take from it and what I must leave with it by way of counterbalance. I have become the two. There is not a clear mind deciding between the two factors of a choice. There is a strange nature in distress over not being two.<sup>11</sup>
- 10 Not only does this passage echo DuBois’s contention about the agony of “double consciousness” (the young African admits that “I have become the two”), it also highlights Diallo’s inability to handle the ordeal generated by the process of cultural mongrelization. His “distress over not being two” then underlies the psychological and moral tension faced by some postcolonial intellectuals who, suspicious of modern values and no longer able to find footing in traditional society, had to live with a Janus-faced identity<sup>12</sup>.
- 11 *L'aventure ambiguë* came out at the time Léopold Sédar Senghor was reassessing his essentialist ideas about the African-Negro personality. Turning from a narrow view of

Négritude as “antiracist racism”, he became a strong advocate of “cultural hybridity (“métissage culturel”) which, he writes, was along with art, “one of the essential features of *Homo sapiens*”<sup>13</sup>. While Senghor emphasizes the richness of the mongrelized self, Cheikh H. Kane attempts to bring into the open its dark side. In a way, Samba Diallo’s inability to cope with his “two-ness” signals the failure of Senghor’s politics of “métissage” since the cultural landscape described in *L’aventure ambiguë* shows a sharp contrast with the intersectional space “of giving and receiving” that was supposed to pave the way for “la Civilisation de l’Universel”<sup>14</sup>. Rather than fostering any viable individuality, “le métissage” results in what Jean-Paul Sartre has called “engluement”, due to the blurring and destabilization of cultural boundaries. In that regard, Diallo’s adventure recalls Obi Okonkwo’s fate, the antihero (not to be confused with Ogbuefi Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*) of Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*. Like Samba Diallo, Obi Okonkwo is a man of words and books, a product of “mission-house upbringing and European education”<sup>15</sup>. The two men are emblematic of the African elite who, evolving between different worlds, had to create an “interstitial space” through which they could assert their postcolonial individuality. But such a space proves perilous and unstable as Samba Diallo realizes: “I have chosen an itinerary liable to get me lost”<sup>16</sup>. Samba Diallo goes on to meditate on the fate awaiting the postcolonial intellectual:

It may be that we shall be captured at the end of our itinerary, vanquished by our adventure itself. It suddenly occurs to us that, all along the road, we have not ceased to metamorphose ourselves, and we see ourselves other than what we were. Sometimes the metamorphosis is not even finished. We have turned ourselves into hybrids, and there we are left. Then we hide ourselves filled with shame.<sup>17</sup>

12 The condition of African students is stressed again when Samba Diallo compares their fate with that of a courier, “at the moment of leaving our home, we do not know whether we shall ever come back”<sup>18</sup>.

13 Cross Damon’s journey in *The Outsider* is similarly dominated by the haunting sense of existential precariousness. After miraculously surviving a subway accident in Chicago, Cross chooses a marginal life before turning himself into a nihilistic criminal. Here marginality fits into Bhabah’s definition of “liminal space” or “Third Space”, one in which the modern self was to be reinvented. Indeed, Cross is given the chance to start from scratch. Once in Harlem, he visits a cemetery to select a name from a tomb. After forging an identity card, he could then live incognito and act as a “little God,” showing ruthless determination to “blot out” anyone trying to infringe upon his newfound freedom. On a train heading for New York, Cross comes upon Elly Houston, the New York General Attorney, who also embodies marginality because he is a hunchback. Both men engage in a long philosophical conversation about the position of the Negro in American society. And when Cross Damon later commits a double manslaughter, Elly Houston is asked to investigate the crime. It does take him long to realize that the potential killer (Cross Damon) is a nihilist who lives in an isolated moral and metaphysical space:

Could there be a man in whose mind and consciousness all the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years have died? A man whose consciousness has not been conditioned by our culture? A man speaking our language, dressing and behaving as we do, and yet living on a completely different plane? A man who would be the return of ancient man, pre-Christian man?<sup>19</sup>

14 Elly Houston goes on to inform us that:

He’s a man living in our modern industrial cities, but he is devoid of all moral influences of Christianity. He has all the unique advantages of being privy to our

knowledge, but he has either rejected it or has somehow escaped its influence. That he's an atheist goes without saying, but he'd be something more than an atheist. He'd be something like a pagan, but a pagan who feels no need to worship.... And, by the nature of things, such a man sooner or later is bound to appear. Modern man sleeps in the myths of the Greeks and the Jews. Those myths are now dying in his head and in his heart. They can no longer serve him. When they are really gone, those myths, man returns. Ancient man... And what's there to guide him? Nothing at all but his own desires, which would be his only values.<sup>20</sup>

- 15 We have seen that Samba Diallo too evolves in a world where ancient myths are falling apart and that it accentuates his sense of loss and dereliction. But while Samba Diallo finds himself bogged down in pathological hybridity, Cross Damon rejects institutionalized values to assert freedom as an absolute staple of his existence. Alienation and moral and psychological isolation give Cross a new lease on life. He enters a new temporality (pre-Christian time) after erasing his past and choosing his destiny for the first time. A transcendental gesture, the exile into a marginal "Third Space" makes him literally existential, a virtual being, a man deprived of any ethical and ideological references because in his "mind and consciousness all the hopes and inhibitions of the last two thousand years have died."
- 16 Samba Diallo's tragic experience stems from cultural and spiritual displacement whereas Cross Damon's retreat from the world is a personal choice and underlies an attempt at re-historicizing himself. After "blotting out" his past and "old consciousness", Cross "was without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges bound him to those about him"<sup>21</sup>. In *Native Son*, re-historicization, coming after the completion of existential metamorphosis, was set in motion by Bigger Thomas's accidental murder of Mary Dalton. Cross Damon moves this idea further as murder, now an "act of creative destruction", turns out to be a manner of ontological rebellion. It is driven by the Nietzschean ideal of transvaluation of values, an ideal meant to pave the way for the emergence of a Zarathustrian type of man and for the advent of a new "historical or temporal regime"<sup>22</sup>.
- 17 *The Outsider* and *L'aventure ambiguë* are clearly philosophical novels. One finds strong Conradian undertones in the depiction of Cross Damon's and Samba Diallo's adventure. In some way, their story can be construed as a reversed enactment of Kurtz's voyage in *Heart of Darkness*. Joseph Conrad describes the way alienation or marginality provides man with a deep insight into human existence. Both Cross Damon and Samba Diallo are lost souls because they are endowed with a disillusioned vision of the world, what Jean-Paul Sartre, commenting on Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*, has referred to as "l'illumination désolée" or "la lucidité sans espoir"<sup>23</sup>. At the end of their spiritual odyssey, Cross Damon and Samba Diallo acquire an ontological understanding of man. But rather than setting them free, this "understanding" leads to moral exile and makes them social outcasts. Asked about why he chose to live as an outsider, Cross Damon is unable to provide any rational answer. Instead, "His mind reeled at the question. There was so much and yet it was so little..."<sup>24</sup>. And the only words he managed to utter during his agony echoes Marlow's elliptical evocation of Kurtz's vision of horror. Answering one last question from Elly Houston, who wants to know about the meaning of his "life", Cross, with a bleak stare reminiscent of Kurtz's look, confesses: "It... It was... horrible"<sup>25</sup>. In a similar manner, the end of *L'aventure ambiguë* is permeated by the sense of existential despair. In Paris, Samba Diallo feels like "a broken balafong, like a musical instrument that has gone dead."<sup>26</sup> Before he is killed by a character named "The Fool", himself an outcast, Samba Diallo, like Cross Damon, ponders: "Master, what is left for me? Darkness is closing on me. I no

longer burn at the heart of beings and things”<sup>27</sup>. Though the metaphor of “darkness” bespeaks the failure of cultural mongrelization, it also partakes of a deconstructive politics of Western philosophical ideas most of which are rooted in the concept Martin Jay has called “ocularcentrism”<sup>28</sup>. Since the Ancient Greeks, Thomas Seifrid contends, “Ocularcentrism” has remained a key paradigm in epistemology and ontology, a dominant trope of knowledge and Being:

That one of the defining eras of modernity is called the Enlightenment merely underscores ocularcentrism’s persistence since the Greeks, as do a multiplicity of cultural forms belonging to the twentieth century, from our now thoroughly visual everyday vocabulary (including casually deployed words and phrases like evidence, insight, shed light on, appears, brilliant) to the rampant videoism of popular culture.<sup>29</sup>

18 It should be recalled that Greek ontology emphasized “sight” or “vision” over all other senses. Aristotle opens his *Metaphysics* by claiming the pre-eminence of sight, which alone among other senses “enables us to acquire knowledge and bring to light many differences between things”<sup>30</sup>. Another famous example on this issue is the allegory of the cave explored by Plato in Book 6 of *Republic*. At the heart of this myth lies the question of light and vision: the encounter with higher essences or truths depends on whether the inhabitants of the cave, living in darkness, can see real things in the light of day or as mere shadows. For Plato, and for Western society, vision, knowledge and reason were inextricably tied to each other as they were considered the locus of truth.

19 How can Plato’s allegory apply to the spiritual journey of the black intellectual? For centuries, the Negro was ideologically and racially confined to a “sub-human” status. In *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Aimé Césaire ironically comments on it:

Those who have invented neither powder nor compass  
those who could harness neither steam nor electricity  
those who exploited neither seas nor the sky<sup>31</sup>.

20 In the Hegelian perspective, History means the transition from “darkness” to higher civilization, the fulfilment of “absolute knowledge”. But the dynamics at work in *The Outsider* and *L’aventure ambiguë* suggests a radical subversion of such a dialectics. Though endowed with acute vision of life, the “Westernized” Negro is unable to undertake the platonic ascension towards transcendent essences. A similar outcome indicates the failure of Western “ocularcentrism” and the values it embodies. This view is expressed by Cross Damon when he contends that “to see was not to control, self-understanding was far short of self-mastery”<sup>32</sup>. And for the African-Negro, the centrality of “Sight” or rationality in understanding the world proves irreconcilable with African ontology, premised upon the unity and the existence of spirits in all living things. The loss of this sense of unity as well as the clash between Western and non-Western ways of conceiving knowledge accentuates the crisis of hybridity in *The Outsider* and *L’aventure ambiguë*.

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## NOTES

1. Michel Fabre, « Richard Wright et l'Afrique », *Notre Librairie*, No 77 novembre-décembre 1984, 46.
2. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 366.
3. Richard Wright, *The Outsider*, 451.
4. Marc Mvé Bekale, *Traite négrière et expérience du temps dans le roman afro-américain*, 42-58.
5. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 178.
6. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38. On the different categories of hybridity, Ella Shohat suggests that we "discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political co-optation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence". See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism*, 178.
7. *The Location of Culture*, 37.
8. Quoted by Bill Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation*, 4.



9. *The Outsider*, 174.
10. *Ibid.*, 457.
11. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'aventure ambiguë*, 164. (My translation)
12. See Oumar Sougou, "Resisting Hybridity: Colonial and Postcolonial Youth in *Ambiguous Adventure* by Cheikh Hamidou Kane and *L'Appel des arènes* by Aminata Saw Fall", <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/rodopi/matat>
13. Jean-Pierre Biondi, *Senghor ou la tentation de l'universel*, 121
14. The phrases "the encounter of giving and receiving" ("le rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir" and " la Civilisation de l'Universel" ("the civilization of the universal") were borrowed from Aimé Césaire and Pierre Teilhard De Chardin.
15. Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, 71.
16. *L'aventure ambiguë*, 125.
17. *Ibid.*, 124-125.
18. *Ibid.*, 124.
19. *The Outsider*, 403.
20. *Ibid.*, 403-404.
21. *Ibid.*, 177.
22. See François Hartog. *Régime d'historicité. Présentisme et expérience du temps*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2003.
23. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critiques littéraires (situations I)*, 124 : "desolate illumination" or "hopeless lucidity".
24. *The Outsider*, 562.
25. *Ibid.*, 563.
26. *L'aventure ambiguë*, 163.
27. *Ibid.*, 174.
28. Martin Jay. *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, in Bill Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation*, 125.
29. Thomas Seifrid is quoted in *Postcolonial Transformation*, 127.
30. Aristote, *Métaphysique*, 2.
31. Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 44.
32. *The Outsider*, 153.

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