

The Path for Black Literature¹

Literature as the index of the culture of a certain human grouping can only be understood insofar as the delimitation and isolation of this group becomes possible, thus enabling knowledge of its social nature, its psychological tendencies, and even its material manifestations.

Based on this principle, for us to understand Black literature, we must first know the individuals who contribute to it in order to avoid the confusion of concepts that is currently made when we refer to “Blacks,” a group that is, in fact, difficult to define because of the divergence of existing points of view both in sociological terms and when considering ethnic criteria. Incapable, therefore, of finding an adequate definition for the individuals whom we are going to discuss, we will consider them only within the socio-literary context in which they develop or to which they have adapted themselves.

To include in this group all individuals of color, Blacks and their descendants, and to do so only for this reason, would be a mistake since, despite their color, many of them—for whatever reason, education, for example—do not possess that minimum of *African culture* to be considered in this literary group, even when we take into account the rich variety of contemporary life. Writers who do not express any *Black quality* in their work would be better suited to the literary currents of the countries or peoples whose culture they reflect. The reticent Machado de Assis is one example. Gonçalves Crespo, another.

Adopting the same criterion, we consider as belonging to Black literature the works of those authors who in some way reflect the manner of being of Black peoples, their feelings, their processes of reaction, with this reflection being not simply a *translation*, but a true *identification*. Thus, we do not include here those “well-intentioned” works of writers who in pursuit of the picturesque or to inspire compassion align themselves with Blackness. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the poems of Jorge de Lima do not belong to Black literature. Neither does the disconcerting colonial “literature” that sometimes enralls Europeans like children in a zoo. Even Black authors who were guided by pure European ideas are excluded from the literary field that concerns us. Rui Noronha, a Black

Mozambican, is in literary terms merely a Portuguese poet, even when we take into account his poem “Surge et Ambula,” one of the few in which he appears aware of the existence of Africa.

We, like W. Somerset Maugham, do not believe that “one can ever really know any but one’s own countrymen. For men and women are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learnt to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives’ tales they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the poets they read, and the God they believed in. [...] And these things [...] you can only know them if you are them.”²

In order to attribute nationality to a certain literary work, it is necessary that the work be based on the lives of those who represent that nationality. And for this to be possible, it is necessary that the author have knowledge of the life of its constituent elements. However, knowledge of the Black experience is not currently within the reach of all authors who are labeled as Black. Knowing, in this case, is not only the collecting of sensory perceptions, but it is also having a notion of the psychic component of people, it is also assuming a certain affective attitude. This knowledge is possessed only by those who are capable of identifying psychologically with the majority of the individuals of their group in order to be able to feel, as they feel, the incidents of everyday life and the manifestations of a cultural and a material character.

We do not know, for example, the extent to which individuals from a purely European culture can understand the poem “Sabás” by Nicolás Guillén. According to our way of thinking, the verse “Porqué Sabás, la mano abierta?”³ demands not only the intervention of intelligence, but also the identification with Sabás for us to be able to condemn in each Black person, with Guillén’s insinuating tenderness, the lack of awareness of the attitude of the “open hand.” Only profound knowledge, not disconnected from experience, and the clear-headed acceptance of the reality of our world can help to comprehend the scope of that verse; the psychological submission, apparent or not, of Black people in the street or the “flagrant arrivisme of the blacks benefiting from power, culture, or wealth”⁴—in other words: the attitude of the “open hand.”

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However, *knowledge* of the Black experience has been hindered by the living conditions of Black people since the sixteenth century.

Their first contact with Europeans was marked by a violent act—conquest. Afterwards, other no less violent acts forced Black people to exercise an essential role in the construction of the countries of the Americas, as Gilberto Freyre clarifies,⁵ and to remain to this day in a situation of inferiority in relation to other peoples, due to the impossibility of education on a large scale and the difficulties [encountered] in the social life of the countries in which they live, along with other reasons that are not relevant to mention here.

According to R.P. Aupias,⁶ the basis for color prejudices resides in these acts of violence. But we do not wish to approach the question in these terms, so that we do not stray from our objective.

These acts of violence led to the submission of Black people, which translates at times into the desire to penetrate European culture and its social life through the rights of citizenship, sometimes with conscious persistence and other times with outright despair in the face of white intransigence. And most of the “truly Black” literary works more or less clearly reflect this state of mind—offended pride, frustrated ambitions, unrealized desires, impotence. Above all, it is literature of sensibility, on occasion authentic walls of lamentation without constructive consequences.

Black people are passing through their period of confusion for having all of a sudden abandoned their culture, completely changing their system of life in one or two generations in order to acquire a European culture built on fragile foundations. Forgetting themselves and their people, with the intention of definitively entering the European civilization whose instruments are cruelly concealed from them, they experience, along with frustration, a phase even more harmful to their personality than slaughters on the field of battle or the whip of declared slavery.

Today, conscious Black individuals already consider their problems in a rational manner. The desire to rediscover their lost or forgotten culture is one of the most encouraging symptoms. The Black cultural movements that are being established in the Americas and in Africa, especially in culturally French Africa, are desirable signs in order for these peoples to find themselves and continue on their path in the history of humanity.

We believe that it is from these movements that the phalanx of writers will emerge who will be capable of definitively leading Black literature to its true course.

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Literature is a reflection of the social life of people and the historical structure that supports it. This reflection is not, however, what we find in many old Black writers and in some modern ones who let themselves be dragged along by the literary currents of Europe. They are, to use a current expression, writers “despite” being Black. Such is the case of Costa Alegre, the Black man from São Tomé about whose race we know nothing except for some poetic phrases, which, compared to his important work, seem to be products of the poet’s moments of distraction. This somewhat paradoxical characteristic is the result of people’s lack of awareness, or rather of such an egoism that renders impossible the manifestation of that “human personality” that radiates, for example, from *Batouala* by René Maran.

From the works of some European authors who lived or presently live in lands under colonial rule, we are familiar with that genre of export books in which men appear to us as colorful toys to serve as distraction for those lovers of sugarcoated literature. What they depict about Africa and Black people is what the European finds exotic; that is, when they are not sprinkling them with malicious phrases.

But this literature of mystification counts—an astonishing fact!—Black authors among its contributors; such is the psychological perversion caused by the sweet lyricism on the paths of an aestheticism that is pure and...inconsequential. Perhaps the hope for a psychological dilution in European culture in order to forget their cultural origins encourages them to produce works of this quality—something that would be a solution for their personal drama. But they fall into the incoherence of deceiving themselves, which is naive and stupid.

In the current Black literature scene, this divergence between the writer and his work tends to disappear. And this is good for all of us. The reality of Black peoples has to be faced without the protection of conventional palliatives to contribute to its cultural elevation.

Only in this way can we consider literature in the sense in which J. Paul Sartre sees Black poetry: “La poésie nègre est évangélique, elle annonce la bonne nouvelle: la négritude est retrouvée.”⁷

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Upon the consummation of the violent act to which we made reference above, Black people saw themselves deprived of the most precious asset of a people: their language. Even though it is used by the majority (in Africa), it ceased being a useful instrument in the contact with European civilization, and it is practically

neither used nor known by those who colonial terminology has labeled as evolved or assimilated.

Thus, Black people speak and write the languages of the countries in whose territories they live, as we all know. Their literary works have been written principally in French and English. We highlight the existence of an important literary nucleus in Dakar, perhaps as an echo of the work of L. Sédor Senghor in Paris and where Diop's work stands out.

Black literature is unknown to most Black people, by virtue of the lack of culture that, much to our regret, still affects very large numbers, and because of the difficulty that exists for the newly-literate to understand a language that they did not imbibe with their mother's milk, despite the accessibility of the moderns. We believe that the writers of the future will create new forms of expression when they experience the influence of the people by working among them. Those forms have not yet appeared. Moreover, today less is written for Black readers than for white readers, as we can see.

On the other hand, translations into native languages do not exist, something that would help the dissemination of books to positive effect, including even the propagation of technical knowledge and scientific ideas.

Even though this expressional impossibility, which distances the writer from his people, is evident, the Black man ceases to appear in literature as a passive victim in order to condemn the social organizations that hinder his development—as we still see in Richard Wright—and now assumes the figure of the man who looks with confidence to the future, such as we find him in Langston Hughes, Aimé Césaire, and others.

Thus, the identification between the writer “as” Black and the Black subject “as” a man is increasingly necessary.

The influence of modern literary styles is quite evident in Black authors, and it is not surprising that this is so, because they are, as a general rule, educated in European schools. But this influence is not the only factor that imparts new directives to our literature. This new rhythm, this new humanism that moves away from a type of pure reaction and that excites in anticipation of better days for humanity announces the rebirth of the Black man to the Black soul.

If there will be, as we hope, an increase in the level of education and if it would be possible to translate into African languages the great works of literature, many possibilities for the paths of Black literature would open, paths that are more clearly directed toward its people where inevitably such work must search

for its sources of inspiration and exercise its function—which is that of all Art—raising people’s awareness of their own problems and those of the world.

We believe that the course of Black literature is drawn in this direction.

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NOTES

1. Published with the kind permission of the Fundação Agostinho Neto. Special thanks to Grace Holleran.

2. W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor’s Edge* (Vintage Books, 1944), p. 3

3. Trans.— “Why, Sabás, with an open hand?”

4. Gilberto Freyre, *Casa Grande e Senzala* (5th edition), p. 717. Translation mine.

5. Idem.

6. In “L’Homme de couleur.”

7. Trans.— “Black poetry is evangelic, it announces good news: blackness has been rediscovered.” Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn, 1964 – Winter, 1965), pp. 13-52. Originally published as the preface to Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris, 1948), p. XV.

AGOSTINHO NETO (1922-1979) was a poet, physician, and politician. He served as the first president of Angola from 1975 to 1979.

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