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Slavery and the triangle of emancipation*

Those of us engaged in this racial struggle in America are like knights on horseback – the Negroes on a white horse and the white folks on a black. Sometimes the race is terrific. But the feel of the wind in your hair as you ride toward democracy is really something! And the air smells so good! — *Langston Hughes, 1943*

Modern slavery, the abolition movement and the emancipation struggles of African slaves and their descendants are all intimately interwoven into the global fabric of empire and emancipation. The slave trade formed an essential part of the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas. For over 200 years slave labour was the foundation of the plantation economies in the West Indies and America. Sugar was sweet and cotton king, textile mills in England spun and English cottons captured the world market, while, in another part of the triptych, African slave labour dug the foundations of progress. Slavery was part of the underside of European industrialisation. Indeed, it might be argued that the emancipation of the bourgeoisie in Europe was furthered by the multiplier effects of the slave trade. The slave trade, while contributing to revolutionising developments in Europe, contributed also to the weakening, the demographic decimation, the social and economic distortion, of Africa. The resistance movements of the African diaspora, the

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* This is an abridged version of a chapter from *Empire and Emancipation: power and liberation on a world scale* (New York, Praeger, forthcoming).

Race & Class, 30(2)1988

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maroon societies of the runaways and the black revolution in Saint Domingue also affected the course of western imperialism. Saint Domingue meant the end of French ambitions in the Caribbean and led to the Louisiana sale. Saint Domingue was also part of the independence struggles in South America. In the United States slavery was among the issues that went into the making of the Civil War. Meanwhile, the movement for the abolition of slavery as part of its programme of Christianity and civilisation paved the way for the colonisation of Africa. The emancipation movements of the African diaspora, resisting the racial oppression following on the termination of slavery, also turned against European imperialism, made pan-Africanism part of their programme and thus contributed to the decolonisation movements in Africa.

In numerous ways, many of which are not yet fully mapped and understood, slavery and emancipation interacted with the global sway of empire and emancipation. It is a story that forms part of the 'other side' of the 'great Atlantic enterprise'; a story that unfolds on the backside of Atlantic civilisation, but nevertheless makes for cracks in its surface. This article sketches some of the episodes of this many-sided process. It discusses the development from the maroon societies to the revolution in Saint Domingue: the transformation of early emancipation struggles – from escapes out of slavery to attacks on slavery as an institution. It reviews the role of religion in the struggles for emancipation, the formation of a black liberation theology (*avant la lettre*): strange opium, as Vincent Harding called it; in fact, a strategic cultural synthesis which became a weapon for emancipation. It concludes by discussing how the trail of the abolition movement led Europe towards the colonisation of Africa, while the trail of the emancipation movement, in some of its ramifications, led 'back to Africa' as well, in more senses than one. Thus this is an attempt to sketch the 'emancipatory triangle' which developed as a counterpart to the 'imperial triangle'.

From the maroons to Saint Domingue

That 'no enslaved people in the world rose in revolt so often and in such numbers or with such a measure of success' has by now been extensively documented.¹ Resistance took many forms short of rebellion – acts of sabotage, sloppy work, work slowdowns, absenteeism, individual acts of violence against overseers, suicide, infanticide. When they managed to escape, runaway slaves established communities of maroons (*palenques* in Spanish, *quilombos* in Portuguese), which recreated African conditions on the new shores. In several instances, as in Mexico and Florida, they were established in

cooperation with American Indians. Palmares in Brazil, the greatest maroon community, held out against the attacks of the Dutch and the Portuguese from 1600 to 1694; eventually, it was defeated by a combined assault of Portuguese colonial and mestizo soldiers and Indians. Military acumen was a frequent characteristic of the maroon societies; they were, at times, politically opportunistic to safeguard their autonomy – making treaties with the planters which required them to return runaway slaves or, as happened in Jamaica, joining the slave-owners to fight other slave revolts. But there were also instances, as in Colombia, of their principled refusal to return runaways.

The early revolts have been characterised as restorationist and isolationist, rather than revolutionary. The maroons were concerned with obtaining their own freedom, not with abolishing slavery, an objective that lay beyond their political horizons. They manipulated the colonial world in defence of their own rights, and this 'might entail not only the re-creation of traditional communities but even the exploitation of other slaves. It also lent itself to deals with colonial governments or ruling classes that still accepted a hierarchically organized, particularist vision of social order.'² In that the early rebellions paved the way for the later revolutionary movements, however, they were revolutionary in a broad sense.

While many maroon communities continued to exist, enclaves of Africa overseas, in the African diaspora at large a different momentum set in. The turning point was the black revolution in Saint Domingue. Saint Domingue itself was the expression of a wider undercurrent, of which it became the symbol, but was not the sole manifestation. Thus in the United States, attempts by blacks to obtain their freedom by petitioning changes in legislation, a novel form of resistance, date back as far as 1760. In the 1770s 'freedom suits' had become a recurrent phenomenon in the northern states; a 1780 Bill in Pennsylvania eventually abolished slavery in that state. In the 1780s several slave conspiracies were reported, notably in Virginia, and by 1787 Free African Societies existed in several northern cities, serving both religious purposes and assisting the freedom struggles of enslaved brothers and sisters.³ This was decades before the revolution in Saint Domingue; it was related to the momentum of the American revolution, the French revolution, the momentum of the 'applied Enlightenment' that would also give rise to abolitionism.

One concrete effect of the American revolution was the diminution of the British slave trade, which was accompanied by a doubling, between 1783 and 1789, of the trade of the French colony of Saint Domingue. The formation of the Abolitionist Society in Britain in 1787 reflected not only humanitarian considerations but business ones as well: an end to the slave trade would ruin prosperous Saint

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Domingue, but not the British West Indies which had already had its fill of slave labour. Yet, even so, in France in the same year the 'Friends of the Negro' had been founded, so a change in the climate of opinion was taking place.

The slaves of Saint Domingue, numbering 500,000, found the mulattoes, numbering only 30,000, and the whites, of about the same number, divided amongst themselves and against each other, as rich and poor, royalist and republican, loyalist and independentist. In July 1791 a rising was planned: 'working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at that time, and their rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement.'⁴ Events in Europe made for propitious circumstances in Saint Domingue – the storming of the Tuileries on 10 August, 1792, which reactivated the civil war between slave-owners in Saint Domingue; the war between revolutionary France and England and Spain which broke out in 1793, and the abolition of slavery by the French Convention in 1794, which led the black revolutionaries to shift their allegiance back to France.

. . . the French Revolution provided the conditions in which a massive revolt in Saint Domingue could become a revolution in its own right. The brilliance with which Toussaint l'Ouverture claimed for his enslaved brother and sisters the rights of liberty and equality – of universal human dignity – that the French were claiming for themselves constituted a turning point in the history of slave revolts and, indeed, of the human spirit.

The slaves, in an uneasy and inconsistent alliance with a large minority of propertied mulattoes, defeated the Spanish, inflicted a defeat of unprecedented proportions on the British, and then made their country the graveyard of Napoleon's magnificent army as well as of his imperial ambitions in the New World. In the end, the Americas had their first black national state.⁵

What distinguished Saint Domingue, renamed Haiti after its original Carib name, from maroon societies such as those in Jamaica or Dutch Guiana was the attempt by its revolutionary leadership to fashion a modern black state, a state that did not turn its back on world society, like the maroon societies which reverted to subsistence agriculture, but participated in the world market through its exports and became part of the international state system. Its ideology was the bourgeois democratic ideology that guided the American and French revolutions.

Eventually, just as France experienced its Thermidor, Haiti also underwent a counter-revolution. Napoleon's attempt to reconquer the island, even though Leclerc's campaign was defeated, formed part

of the countercurrent. Later, Bonaparte admitted that this had been a strategic mistake. Haiti took over the French revolutionary formula of agrarian egalitarianism; it became a peasant country with a centralised authoritarian state to safeguard small-scale peasant proprietorship.

The Haitian revolution is a remarkable instance of the dialectics of empire and emancipation. ‘Sad irony of human history’, remarked Jaurès, an observation repeatedly quoted by C.L.R. James. ‘The fortunes created at Bordeaux, at Nantes, by the slave trade gave the bourgeoisie that pride which needed liberty and contributed to human emancipation.’⁶ True enough, but the story did not end there. French *liberté égalité fraternité* ricocheted across the Atlantic, *back* to the slaves who had earlier laboured to create the wealth of the French bourgeoisie. The French revolution contributed directly to the revolution in Haiti; between 1794 and 1797 there was active French support for the Black Jacobins. Human history is replete with ironies, but they are not necessarily sad ones. The ripple effects of the Haitian revolution were momentous in their turn. Haiti was ‘a small country with a big revolution’.

The example of the Black Jacobins reverberated throughout the Americas, firing the imagination of slaves as well as slave-owners. The slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in Virginia in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in 1822 looked to Haiti for inspiration and support. Haiti was to the African diaspora what the Ethiopian victory of 1896 was to colonised Africans and the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 to Asia – a call of awakening. San Domingo became a war cry for slaves throughout the Americas. It ‘stirred the slaves and free Negroes to rebellion under a modern ideology that posed a new and more dangerous threat to the old regimes than anything previously encountered’. Besides, it ‘enormously strengthened the anti-slavery movement in England and prepared the way for its flowering in America’.⁷

The Haitian revolution also affected the global balance of power. The defeat of Napoleon’s forces ended his dream of a New World empire and led to the sale of Louisiana, which doubled the territory of the United States. The losses suffered by the British in Saint Domingue weakened them in their war against revolutionary France: Sir John Fortescue, a British military historian, observed that the secret of Britain’s failure to crush the French revolution ‘may be said to lie in the fatal words, Saint Domingue’.⁸ The influence of Haiti also extended to the national revolutionary movements in South America, through the assistance given to Simon Bolivar by Dessalines, on condition that the emancipation of slaves become a part – a part that was reluctantly implemented – of South American revolutionary programmes.

The Haitian revolution coincided with the period of the North

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American Indian wars from Pontiac to Tecumseh. Both occurred when European rivalries in the Americas culminated. Thus, the manoeuvring of Toussaint l'Ouverture parallels the politics of alignment practised by Pontiac. In its later stages, after 1794, the Haitian revolution paralleled the era ushered in among native North Americans by Tecumseh. Toussaint was to slave resistance what Tecumseh was to native American resistance – both were harbingers of a new nationalism, representing turning points in consciousness and political practice. Both operated within the context of the new conditions and mentalities associated with the American revolution and the French revolution respectively; emancipatory currents that operated across ethnic boundaries. Tecumseh's call for a red nation broke with tribal traditionalism and separatism, just as the black nationalism of Toussaint went beyond the isolationism of the maroon societies. In other respects, the itineraries of both movements diverged. In Haiti blacks claimed a new human dignity as well as adopting a new political format – republicanism and the nation-state; on the American frontier the Indian nations in existence were steamrollered by the advance of the American nation, for whom, as an indirect consequence of the black Jacobin revolution (the Louisiana purchase), a continental horizon had opened up.

The drastic change in the outlook of slave resistance from the late eighteenth century was thus part of a wider momentum. The ethos of the American Declaration of Independence, the credo of the French revolution expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man reverberated throughout the world – copies of the Declaration circulated in Ireland (they turned up in the Irish rebellion of 1798), among Jacobin societies in England, among South American protagonists in the independence struggles and among slaves in the African diaspora.

In his letters to Thomas Jefferson in the 1780s, Benjamin Banneker (the black astronomer and mathematician) quoted the terms of the Declaration of Independence back to him: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .' The Hymn of Freedom sung by slaves in South Carolina, recorded in 1813, also shows how blacks translated the aspirations of the epoch:

And when your health and strength are gone
Are left to hunger and to mourn
Let *Independence* be your aim ...⁹

In Robert Alexander Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto*, published in February 1829, this outlook took on prophetic shape – a black messiah would come 'to call together the black people as a nation in themselves'. In the same year David Walker's powerful *Appeal to the coloured citizens of the world* came out, calling for concern with 'the

entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world'. Both Young and Walker were black nationalists and precursors of what came to be called 'Pan-Negroism'.

Yet, the ratio of slaves to freed men and whites was nowhere so propitious to slave revolutions as it had been in Haiti. Elsewhere in the West Indies, with the closing of the slave trade the ratio of Africans to creoles changed such that creole preponderance shaped the political climate. Creoles were in the leadership of the great risings in British Guiana and Jamaica. After the Jamaica rebellion of 1831, Viscount Goderich observed that 'now an indigenous race of men has grown up, speaking our own language and instructed in our religion'. Blind submission could no longer be expected.¹⁰ In the United States, slaves were fewer in numbers and worked in much smaller concentrations than elsewhere in the Americas; they were encircled by a white vigilante society, all of which greatly reduced the chances of revolt, as numerous failed attempts testify.

In the 1840s, after so many slave revolts had failed in the United States, a new tactic developed, the Underground Railroad which illegally transported slaves from the South to sanctuary in the North. It was a movement that was the inverse of the maroon tradition – not away from white society, but towards it, into its very industrial centres. It was a manifestation of black solidarity across status lines, freed blacks assisting their enslaved relations. It was made possible by the existence of two white societies, two political economies coexisting in one land, and formed part of the widening gap between North and South, between industrial and plantation economy, urban and rural, wage and slave labour, protectionist and free trade-oriented polities. John Brown also stood on this borderline, a white man enraged by slavery, a man committed to better the condition of those 'who are always on the under-hill side'. For his raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, an armed assault on the institution of slavery, he and his black comrades were hanged.

The North-South rift came to a head in the Civil War. In the course of the conflict Congress adopted the Emancipation Proclamation which declared all slaves in rebel territory free as of 1 January 1863. The abolition of slavery in the United States almost coincided with the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1861, also a step towards 'emancipation into capitalism'.

Experiences following the Emancipation Proclamation showed that 'revolutions may go backward'.¹¹ The position of blacks, now free, was actually set back in several respects. Decades earlier Tocqueville had observed that 'in those parts of the union in which Negroes are no longer slaves they have in no wise drawn nearer to the whites. On the contrary, the prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still

exists.¹² If slavery was the bottom of a pit, the most concrete and solid form of a multi-layered system of subjugation, then emancipation from slavery would mean the continuation of struggle against higher echelons of oppression. The conveniences of ethnic hierarchies, the urge towards domination were still at large; the process of dehumanisation, which had succeeded in sanctifying slavery, was active still. The dropping of chains could mean a tightening of ropes. Thus the abolition of slavery set in motion new modes of oppression: Jim Crow laws, segregating public places and facilities, adopted in 1865-6 in Mississippi, Florida, Texas and becoming custom elsewhere in the South; the race riots of the 1860s from New York to Memphis; terrorism and assassinations of blacks by white mobs. In 1866 the Ku Klux Klan was set up by Confederate veterans. Following the Reconstruction in the South, attempts by blacks to obtain ownership of plots of land were sabotaged; they became sharecroppers and were kept in a state of debt peonage, if they were not driven in a mass exodus to the North.

Some of the dimensions of this backlash had been in evidence already for some time in general popular culture, reflecting the counterpoint to abolitionism:

By the middle of the nineteenth century a selfconsciousness had crept in and with it a loss of innocence. The black man had become someone to contend with, at least as far as Britain and the northern states of America were concerned. The jokes against him became crueller, the caricatures more distorted, and black and white relationships a subject for tragedy, not comedy.¹³

This highlights also that attitudes hardened and conflicts intensified because of emancipation, as evidence that black people were beginning to count. Some forms of racism are premised on the threat of equality rather than on the simple assumption of inequality.

In the North the field of struggle changed. An indication was the resolution passed by the Tammany Hall Young Men's Democratic Committee in March 1862: 'We are opposed to emancipating Negro slaves unless on some plan of colonisation, in order that they may not come in contact with the white man's labor.' This struck two chords which reverberated for a long time. One was the exclusion of blacks from the labour market – the central arena of struggle in the North. Blacks who, prior to Emancipation, had been skilled labourers found it impossible to find skilled employment after Emancipation; they were deskilled. Exclusion from the unions was standard and remained so for a long time; the creation of an ethnic sub-proletariat weakened the American labour movement as a whole.¹⁴ The solution proposed in the resolution was colonisation, an option that many slaveholders in

the South and immigrant workers in the North could agree on. President Lincoln – miscast as the Great White Emancipator in one of history’s ironies – also regarded emigration as a rational solution to the ‘Negro problem’ and an appropriate measure to counterbalance Emancipation, lest the latter be mistaken for social equality.

Opposition to colonisation schemes among blacks, from Richard Allen to David Walker was intense: ‘America is more our country, than it is the whites – we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*.’¹⁵ Emancipation had created, or sealed the creation of a new social entity: Afro-Americans. Yet, the idea of emigration (either to Africa or the West Indies or Latin America) also kept finding black advocates, particularly after setbacks on the long road from Emancipation to equality. Martin Delany gave up on the United States after the federal fugitive slave law of 1850. Henry Highland Garnet struck a more positive note in 1859: ‘Hayti is ours, Jamaica is ours, and Cuba will soon be ours’; so did Marcus Garvey, although he rose to mass popularity in the wake of the disillusion and race riots of 1919.

This ‘Back to Africa’ theme we will return to later; now I want to look into the role of religion in the emancipation struggle, for it is part of the ‘how’ of emancipation.

Strange opium

‘When we speak of the black liberation struggle’ in the United States, ‘we are talking about a movement that was created in and supported by the black church.’¹⁶ According to Manning Marable: ‘The foundations of modern Black politics are found within the Black Church.’¹⁷ Genovese, speaking about revolts in the hemisphere says: ‘Religion did not simply color the social revolt, as an early social interpretation suggested; rather, as Roger Bastide insists, it was “the very heart of the revolt”.’¹⁸ In the Old World Nietzsche denounced Christianity for being a slave religion, inculcating a slave morality of weakness, submissiveness, powerlessness. Friedrich Engels, on the other hand, pointed to the parallel between early Christianity and the modern working-class movement: ‘Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freed men, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome.’¹⁹ Both were speaking of slave religion, with utterly different evaluations; yet both these assessments underestimated the wonderful versatility of Christianity. For Christianity was also a slaveholding religion, the white world’s chief official alibi for slavery, which was pictured – in somewhat unstable colours – as the rescue and redemption of poor heathens from a barbarian continent. Early on, some Congregations held slaves, preachers were among the slaveholders and, later, some preachers

participated in Klan rallies. Christianity was the conscience of white domination; by the same token, however, it was also the largest crack in the dominant culture. The scriptures were the only education allowed to slaves; Christianity the only form of religion allowed to slaves; religious meetings the only form of public expression allowed to slaves. Consequently, Christianity and the language of the scriptures became the language of hope and struggle, the preacher the first politician, the Spiritual the first declaration of resistance, the religious meeting the venue of social transcendence. At the same time, this Christianity was also an African mask.

In the slave risings are found the footprints of religion wherever records are available. 'Until the nineteenth century, and even then albeit with altered content, religion provided the ideological rallying point for revolt. In the Caribbean and South America religious leaders – Obeahmen, Myalmen, Vodûn priests, *Nánigos*, Muslim teachers – led, inspired, or provided vital sanction for one revolt after another.'²⁰ In Saint Domingue, according to Sidney Mintz, '*vaudou* surely played a critical role in the creation of a viable armed resistance by the slaves against the master classes'.²¹ This was the case in the early slave revolts led by Macandal and Biassou, or when 15,000 slaves went into battle under Hyacinthe in the belief that if they died they would return to Africa. The uprising in 1791 that sparked off the revolution of Saint Domingue was led by a Vodûn priest.

On a night in August a tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind and heavy showers of rain. Carrying torches to light their way, the leaders of the revolt met in an open space in the thick forests of Morne Rouge, a mountain overlooking Cap François, the largest town. There Boukman, the leader, after Voodoo incantations and the sucking of the blood of a stuck pig, gave the last instructions.²²

After Toussaint had come to power he suppressed Voodoo and declared Roman Catholicism the state religion (Voodoo, of course, survived and by the twentieth century, during the Duvalier regimes, had become an instrument of domination and oppression).

In North America, the process through which slave revolts, though inspired by African religion, came to assimilate Christianity was also that through which Christianity itself passed from being a slave-masters' religion to becoming an emancipatory religion – a process that brings us right into the politics of religion. The slaves who rebelled in New York in 1712 espoused traditional African religion and 'called for war on the Christians in a manner suggestive of the early Caribbean Obeahmen and foreshadowing the call to arms of the Vodûn priests of Saint Domingue'.²³ The rebels in Stono, South Carolina, in 1739 followed a syncretic religion with at least a formal

adherence to Catholicism. Different again was the course taken by slaves in Massachusetts who, in 1774, sent a petition to the Governor stating that slavery is incompatible with Christianity and, besides, that 'we have in common with other men a natural right to our freedoms without being deprived of them by our fellowman'.²⁴

Indeed, it was a matter of concern to control the kind of Christianity relayed to slaves. Slave masters learned to be careful about which parts of the bible to communicate to slaves; bible study and any form of literacy were frequently prohibited, and there were attempts literally to beat the spirit out of slaves and to forbid them to pray. Counteracting this were the independent religious services organised by black people; the dissident forms of Christianity they came in contact with; and the influence of the ideas of the age of the democratic revolution.

Wherever possible, slaves conducted their own independent religious services. In due course black churches separated – in the 1780s the first Free African Societies were established in the northern cities. This created the platform for the black minister – 'the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil', according to DuBois. The priest or medicineman, 'the chief remaining institution' from Africa, the charismatic representative of the *nommo* or essence of his people, a synthesis of 'bard, physician, judge, and priest', became in the American South 'the Negro preacher'.²⁵

Within the dissident currents in Christianity, the Quakers were among the first to reject slavery and to introduce the relationship between the gospel and freedom. Baptists and Methodists, which started out as sects of lower class whites, won over blacks in massive numbers in the years after the war of independence, because 'They directly attacked slavery in the name of religion, while simultaneously embracing blacks as brothers in their fellowship'.²⁶ Several decades later, polarisation on the question of abolition caused them to split – the Methodists after 1836 and the Baptists in 1845. Some churches, however, retained a consistent position throughout these turbulent times: 'The Catholic Church remained intact (not split) all through the civil war, a militant pro-slavery organisation'.²⁷ The volte-face of the American churches was part of the backlash against abolitionism, against the Underground Railroad, part of the hardening of attitudes that became manifest by the mid-nineteenth century. The major denominations duly sent missionaries down South to outflank the black theology of liberation, to preach obedience and reconcile the gospel with slavery.

The central theme of slave theology, as in contemporary liberation theology, was the story of Exodus. In Virginia in 1800 Gabriel Prosser used religious services to build a following of thousands and developed his insurrection plan by analogy with the leading of the Israelites

out of bondage. The uprising organised by Denmark Vesey in South Carolina in 1822 was centred on the membership of the African Church of Charleston. As one of the trial witnesses declared, Vesey 'read to us from the Bible, how the children of Israel were delivered out of Egypt from bondage'. Nat Turner was a mystic whose religion was that of black revolt; when, on trial, he was asked 'Do you not find yourself mistaken now?' he replied, 'Was not Christ crucified?' Prophet Nat's case was a warning; hence the Mississippi law of 1831 which ruled it 'unlawful for any slave, free Negro, or mulatto to preach the gospel' under pain of receiving thirty-nine lashes upon the naked back. After Harriet Tubman escaped from Maryland in 1849 and was expected to settle in Philadelphia, she was reported to have said: 'There are three million of my people on the plantations of the south. I must go down, like Moses into Egypt, to lead them out.' She, too, said Vincent Harding, 'knew how to exhort, sing spirituals and carry a gun'.

Part of black religious experience, as DuBois noted, was 'the Music, the Frenzy'. There was also the suffering and the transmutation of suffering. A native American scholar, no particular admirer of Christendom, notes: 'If you have ever heard a song sung in a Black church, like "If I Can Help Somebody", or if you have ever heard the late Martin Luther King speak, you must know that you are experiencing the *peak* of Christianity in the United States.'²⁸ In addition to the alchemy of suffering, there was dissimulation, mimicry as the elementary survival strategy of oppressed people; in the hallowed tradition of 'puttin' on ol' massa', the spirituals often carried double meanings.

Black theology needed to address not only the actual condition of slavery but also the mentality that surrounded it – the niggering process. That Africans were heathens was, after all, an unstable argument to justify slavery; after their conversion, what could then justify their servitude? Hence the popularity of alternative notions that would solidify the idea of 'born slaves': black people were the sons of Ham, cursed to everlasting servitude, or they were less-than-human, a transitional species in-between man and apes – an idea that percolated widely from the late eighteenth century into the twentieth, in forms more or less explicit. Thomas Jefferson, a slave-owner who opposed slavery, thought blacks so 'ugly, odorous, reasonless' that he advocated shipping them back to Africa.²⁹ This issue was confronted head on, as in David Walker's *Appeal* which was addressed to Jefferson: 'we are MEN, and not brutes, as we have been represented, and by millions treated', 'we are men, notwithstanding our improminent noses and woolly heads', 'we are MEN, who feel for each other'.³⁰ Reverend Lewis Woodson in 1837 wrote of 'the identity and sameness of the whole human family ... made to be of one blood ... one great brotherhood'.³¹ In this way the emphasis of black theology is

different from that of native American religion. American Indians were not enslaved, they were just killed and their land taken; accordingly, survival and land are keynotes of red theology. Black theology is above all a *humanist* theology and, as such, it assimilated and merged with, as in Young and Walker's manifestos of 1829, the egalitarian ideas of the age of democratic revolution. Throughout the nineteenth century the black churches played a vital role in abolition movements and black politics. Aside from servants and minstrels, the black minister was one of the few public roles blacks were permitted to perform; black churches probably reached the peak of their influence in the years before the First World War.

With the civil rights movement after the Second World War black churches again marched in the frontline of the emancipation movement. The Montgomery bus boycott, sparked off by Rosa Parks in December 1955, started the movement in which Martin Luther King and the SCLC played a leading part. 'I have a dream', said King in Washington DC, 'that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slave-owners and the sons of former slaves will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.' This dream, he said, was 'deeply rooted in the American Dream' – referring not to the 'American way of life' of the 1950s and its mass consumerism, but to the dream that goes back to the Declaration of Independence. Thus King and the civil rights movement stood in the tradition with which black liberation theology had started: the strategic synthesis of radical Christian prophecy with the egalitarian thrust of the age of the democratic revolution – a tradition of almost 200 years of exhortation. But the methods of action had changed. The black church had taken its lessons from a century of labour struggles, from Mahatma Gandhi and his tactics of mass mobilisation, from movements against colonialism all over the world. Among the first to put black mass protest action into practice was A. Philip Randolph, the socialist founder of the Brotherhood of Black Sleeping Car Porters, who started the March on Washington movement in 1941. The strength of the civil rights movement was that it synthesised the many currents and dimensions of black emancipation – the charismatic legacy of the African priest, the radicalised Christianity from below, the appropriation of western humanism as the riposte to racism, the tradition of labour struggles, and black urban activism.

The African diaspora and Africa

Black servitude in North America and Africa becomes black revolt in Africa and North America, the one liberation inspiring and preparing the ground of the other, just as Africa's oppression

provided the basis for black America's centuries ago. — *David Horowitz, 1971*

That the movement for the abolition of slavery paved the way for Europe's colonisation of Africa need not be doubted in the case of British abolitionism. Commerce, Christianity and colonisation were the three main elements in the abolition programme. Commerce because fair trade with Africa would be a substitute for the slave trade; Christianity because its civilising influence would remedy the heathen, barbaric conditions in Africa held responsible for the trade in human beings; colonisation because it would be far less costly and more effective than England's policy of attempting to stop the slave trade by means of naval patrols. Besides, colonisation would alleviate the problem of domestic 'overpopulation' which had become a concern ever since Malthus broached the subject in 1798. In this vein Britain had already acquired settlements in Sierra Leone (1788), the Gambia (1816) and the Gold Coast (1821). Thus, phasing out the slave trade went together with phasing in colonial involvement in Africa, which for England also represented an extension of empire.³²

American abolitionism was not marked by such a preoccupation with colonisation. America's leading white abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, began his career with a pamphlet, *Thoughts on African colonization* (1832), that attacked the American Colonisation Society, arguing that its programme was racist in spirit. This organisation, which included prominent slaveholders, was to encourage manumission of slaves with compensation to their owners and to finance the deportation of the former slaves and of free blacks to Africa.³³ Liberia was established by the United States in 1822 as a Free State for the settlement of American blacks (it achieved independence in 1847). American expansionism at the time was continentalist, directed towards the frontier: by the time that it directed itself outwards, its course of expansion lay within the hemisphere and across the Pacific, not towards Africa. Also, the concern in the United States, unlike in England, was with labour shortages.

The revitalisation of interest on the part of the British government in expanding the empire, after a period of official reluctance, is usually traced to the Abyssinia campaign of 1867 – a time when the Disraeli cabinet was dealing with the Second Reform Bill and confronting a rising tide of social unrest. Two years earlier, in October 1865, a minor revolt in Morant Bay, a town in Jamaica, had been bloodily suppressed by Governor Eyre; some 500 free Jamaicans lost their lives in the repression, which in turn led to heated political debate in England, where Carlyle, Dickens, Tennyson and Ruskin defended the Governor's actions. 'After the events of 1865 English racial antagonisms crystallised more clearly than at any time since the collapse of the slave lobby.'³⁴ Among the factors, then, that accompanied Britain's

re-entry into imperial expansion, in what was to be the overture to the European Scramble for Africa, was the effective abolition of slavery in the Americas, labour unrest at home and an upsurge of public expressions of racism – a combination that included commercial and ‘social imperialist’ considerations.³⁵

The era of the new imperialism was both the period of Europe’s greatest expansion and the height of European racism and chauvinism. In this regard, there were no differences between the Old World and the New; the New World undertook its continental expansion and pacification with the same ferocity and racism on its frontiers – with terrorism against American Indians and blacks, lynchings and the KKK – as European colonialism was to manifest in its conquest and pacification of Africa. The bloody era of the new imperialism advertised the affinity of expansionist consciousness and racism. This symmetry did not go unnoticed.

In 1899 the Afro-American Council in the United States demanded an end to lynching at the same time as giving its support to the newly founded Anti-Imperialist League. It was the first step towards the convergence of anti-racism and anti-colonialism. A year later, a Pan-African Conference was organised in London which brought together Afro-Americans, West Indians and Africans. The idea of ‘Pan-Africanism’ was conceived by Henry Sylvester-Williams, a barrister from Trinidad, who had made contact with West Africans in Britain. From the United States the black scholar, W.E.B. DuBois, participated in the conference. DuBois took the idea further and was the moving force in organising four further Pan-African Congresses, held in Paris, Brussels, Lisbon (capitals of countries with colonies in Africa) and New York between 1919 and 1927, with delegates from the African diaspora and Africa. The colonial liberation of Africa, the aim of the organisation, merged with an anti-racist outlook; thus the Manifesto of the Second Pan-African Congress of 1921 stated (and the style of DuBois is recognisable):

That in the vast range of time, one group should in its industrial technique, or social organisation, or spiritual vision, lag a few hundred years behind another, or forge fitfully ahead, or come to differ decidedly in thought, deed and ideal, is proof of the essential richness and variety of human nature, rather than proof of the co-existence of demi-gods and apes in human form.³⁶

The African diaspora was awakening to its African heritage. Marcus Garvey had landed in New York from Jamaica and founded in 1914 what became the largest and most popular of all black mass movements, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey was the first to popularise the diaspora’s nexus with Africa and to

advertise the Back-to-Africa idea. 'Africans, unite!' was Garvey's slogan, black pride the keynote of his movement: 'Be as proud of your race today as your fathers were in the days of yore. We have a beautiful history, and we shall create another in the future that will astonish the world.' 'Africa for the Africans' was part of his programme: he considered himself an 'African overseas' and called for a union of all the world's coloured peoples in the Americas, Africa, India, China and Japan, a notion foreshadowing the Third World solidarity of later times.³⁷ Garveyism, a mass movement of working-class blacks, might be considered a grassroots equivalent of Pan-Africanism, which was an initiative of black intellectuals. The meteoric rise of Garveyism occurred in the aftermath of the First World War and amidst the bitter experiences of demobilisation. 'More than seventy black people were lynched during the first year after armistice. Ten black soldiers, some still in uniform, were lynched.'³⁸ Twenty-five race riots took place between June and December of 1919. (There were also race riots in London in that year.)

The African connection played a part also in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, when black culture became a society vogue, jazz began to change the American soundscape, and Afro-American poets such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes began to explore the African cultural heritage. Similar developments were taking place in the West Indies, with calypso, 'indigenism' (Haiti) and 'negrism' (Cuba), in Paris with 'Negro Art', Dada, cubism and Josephine Baker.

In the 1930s George Padmore and C.L.R. James, intellectuals from the West Indies, set up the International African Service Bureau in London and edited its journal *International African Opinion* which was devoted to colonial liberation. The first pressure group for the colonial liberation of Africa in the metropolitan world, it built further on the efforts of the Pan-African congresses. The example of the Soviet Union, marxism (later also Trotskyism) were important influences as well. This Pan-African network exercised a strong influence in support of African decolonisation. As Basil Davidson notes: 'The men who brought the nationalist message; often in the guise of Pan-Negroism, were Transatlantics, black Americans and West Indians.'³⁹ People associated with African colonial liberation movements, such as Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, future heads of state of the newly independent African nations, moved through these circles and received their intellectual formation through them. When Ghana achieved independence in 1957 (the first black African nation to do so), Kwame Nkrumah as president made Pan-Africanism, in the sense of the political unification of Africa, his platform. Ghana adopted several of the symbols of Pan-Africanism: Garvey's Black Star Line returned in the name of Ghana's national

shipping line; the black star became the centrepiece of Ghana's flag; DuBois, invited by Nkrumah to direct plans for an Encyclopedia Africana, went into self-exile in Ghana and became its 'first citizen'.⁴⁰

A karmic circle was being squared: where once there had been the triangular trade there was now an emancipatory Pan-African triangle. 'Africans in the diaspora for many years were the driving forces of Pan-Africanism', wrote the late Walter Rodney, who himself embodied the trans-Atlantic connection: 'Europeans enslaved Africans and colonised Africa. They could never have imagined that some of the slaves would be instrumental in the freeing of the colonies . . .'.⁴¹ This process was not without its paradoxes. Africa, like the African diaspora before it, had been violently reborn into world history. Its process of liberation would partake of the same inner contradictions which had marked its process of subjugation – a patchwork of collaboration and resistance. Pan-Africanism, according to Walter Rodney, 'is not simply a unity of colour, it is also a unity of common condition'. The Pan African network was an encounter of different kinds of 'Africans overseas', of the African diaspora and African émigrés. They found that what they shared was a common origin, a common pigmentation, a common condition and a common exposure to occidental culture. If the irony was that all were steeped in metropolitan culture, the double irony was that they had been exposed to different metropolitan cultures.

In organising the Pan-African Congresses, DuBois found himself at odds with Blaise Diagne, Senegal's first African *député* in the French National Assembly, who helped organise the Paris conference. French colonialism, like Portuguese colonialism, had been concerned with the cultural and political integration of its 'overseas provinces' into the motherland and with the assimilation of native elites as *évolués* and *asimilados*. This produced an African elite reared in French culture, officers in the French army, deputies in the French National Assembly, members of the Grand Orient de France – an elite more metropolitan oriented than African, an elite which found its emancipation in collaboration. In the Pan-African Congress, 'Diagne was a Frenchman before being a Pan-African, and insisted upon praising French colonial rule, while attacking the other European powers' operations in Africa.⁴² These and other tensions built into the Pan-African movement resurfaced after independence and form part of the background of the divisions within the Organisation of African Unity.⁴³

The exposure to occidental culture, refracted through different metropolitan cultures, also meant that the African diaspora saw Africa through a metropolitan lens. 'Africa' – the 'Aethiopia' of the ancients, the 'Ifriqia' of the Moors, of Leo Africanus – bequeathed to Europe to become a land of its fantasies and fears, was now passed on

to the African diaspora who found Africa in European Africana. Marcus Garvey derived his image of mythical Africa from textbooks and popular sources of the type that went:

Tattooed cannibals danced in files;
Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust song
An' a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong.⁴⁴

The jazz big bands of the Harlem Renaissance and Josephine Baker's banana-skirt dances in Paris reproduced the white man's stereotype of Africa for white audiences – the kind of stereotypes that underpinned the lynchings in the South. The main source on Africa that Aimé Césaire kept referring to through the years was the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius.⁴⁵ Negritude – the outlook formulated by Césaire and Damas from the West Indies and Senghor from Senegal in Paris in the 1930s – also reproduced some of the European stereotypes of 'Africa', now reevaluated in positive terms. It was not that, at the time, there was much choice. This intercontinental game of mirrors was to last until Africans themselves regained their voice and their face.

Metropolitan culture is also a window on the world, an intercontinental rendezvous. It is not the only window with a global view. Another movement that lifted Afro-Americans out of their cultural insularity was the Nation of Islam, which has had its centres in Detroit and Chicago from 1930 on. Islam brought Afro-Americans in contact with the *umma*, the global community of Muslims. The movement grew massively in the early 1960s, another avenue of black internationalism. In Mecca – another intercontinental rendezvous – Malcolm X found what the United States had not been able to show him: 'The brotherhood! The people of all races, colours, from all over the world coming together as one!'⁴⁶

The emancipation movements of the 1950s and 1960s represented a synthesis of multiple influences, inspirations, which in turn addressed and inspired an increasingly global audience. If the turn of the century was the era of the Pan movements, the postwar era was the time of the 'worlds'. The Third World concept, created in the 1950s, found an eloquent spokesman in a black psychiatrist from Martinique, Frantz Fanon: 'The Third World today faces Europe like a colossal mass whose aims should be to try to resolve the problems to which Europe has not been able to find the answers.'⁴⁷ In the era of decolonisation entire worlds were clashing – the world of the three continents and the Tricontinental Movement, which had come out of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, and the metropolitan world, which itself was ripped by 'third worldism', or so at least it seemed. The civil rights movement had ripple effects both nationally and internationally. In

the United States, 'The upsurge of movements based in other racially defined minority communities (Chicano, Indian, Asian-American, etc.), the emergence of a powerful feminist movement, the appearance of gay liberation and anti-war protest, all owe something to the black liberation struggle of those decades.'⁴⁸ The great bus boycott in South Africa in 1957 was modelled on the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott; in Northern Ireland the civil rights marches of Catholics in 1968 were directly inspired by the freedom marches of American blacks; In Australia Aborigines began their Freedom Rides in the 1960s inspired by the black American example. Visits to England by King in 1964, Malcolm in 1965, Stokely Carmichael in 1967 led to the formation of joint black American and British organisations.

The trans-Atlantic dynamics which began with slavery are in motion still. The coming to independence of African nations in the 1960s inspired and strengthened the Black Power movement in the diaspora. The idea of 'black nationalism', eclipsed since the 1930s, temporarily revived. The reggae music of the Caribbean Rastafari, of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Jimmy Cliff, became popular in the western world as well as Africa. Marley sang at the concert that celebrated the independence of Zimbabwe. Also of importance is the increasing political weight of the black vote in the United States and its ramifications. On the basis of black political clout a number of black organisations initiated the Free South Africa Movement in 1984, which is having a limited but significant impact.⁴⁹

* * *

Are there grounds, finally, for speaking of an 'emancipatory triangle' that redresses the historical balance of the triangular trade? The idea is nice, but it is both too neat and too glowing. What has happened, and is still, is both much less and much more than this. Much less because many in the African diaspora exist as a vast underclass in the western world that is struggling for survival and empowerment. Much more because people of the African diaspora have joined a stream that is far wider than the waters of the Middle Passage, and have carried it further.

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