

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the contact of various American writers and the cultures of the African continent in the 20th century. The continent went through complete cultural, social, political, economic and historical changes in the 20th century. At the backdrop of this scene many American writers visited and were inspired by Africa which resulted in unique cultural, artistic but also political perspectives that came to be considered artefacts. Novelists such as Ernest Hemingway, W.E. B Du Bois and Langston Hughes drew the world's attention to the African matters and set the path of other explorers of the African experience and the cultural scene on the continent. This proved that the cultural passage to Africa meant mutual reflection, mirroring and transition of historical, cultural and economic heritage between the USA and the African lands.

Key words: African experience, American writers, 20th century

Introduction

This paper explores the various types of literary contacts between well-known American writers and the African continent in the 20th century. This specific and unlikely “passage” between the continents is of particular importance in order to examine the approaches, links and the availability of the African experience for the Americans in the past century. The outcome of this contact is of vast proportions: two different entities both inextricably connected and divided at the same time find their link in the literary expressions of numerous American writers. The resulting experience of the intercontinental and intercultural immersion struck a unique chord that echoed across decades to follow. All the literary and cultural changes that the American writers of the time experienced go hand in hand with the main historical, economic and political changes in all the places where they resided and worked.

The history of the African continent is impossible to be grasped in one article, it is a timeline of frameworks and entire chapters about the complexity and the vastness of the African lands. As the second largest and second most populous continent in the world after Asia, Africa is an expansion of land that straddles the equator, is surrounded by seas and oceans, boasts all kinds of natural diversity and resources but also diverse and complex history. In accordance with African cosmology, African historical consciousness viewed historical change and continuity, order and purpose within the framework of man and his environment, the gods, and his ancestors, and he believed himself part of a holistic spiritual entity (Ajaegbo, 1990 p.139-151). In African societies, the historical process is largely a communal one, with eyewitness accounts, hearsay, reminiscences, and occasionally visions, dreams, and hallucinations crafted into narrative oral traditions which are performed and transmitted through generations. (Vansina, Jan, 1985 p.12-48).

Main text

A look into the cultural contact gives us a way to parallelism although in this paper the contact will remain termed “cultural” instead of intercultural. The American writers' personal experience and adoption of cultural inputs is central to their artistic output and personal growth, while the historical discernment of the events remains the accompanying trait.

As Nathaniel Nunn discusses in his 2012 paper “Culture and the Historical Process”, “in thinking about the sources of historical persistence, culture plays a potentially important role because it is a slow-moving variable whose evolution can be affected by historical events”

(Nunn 2012, p.3). Consequently, the colonial legacy shows the alternations taking place as a result of the changes in the culture and the institutions. Essentially, according to Nunn culture evolves at the background to all the shocking and shaking events (p.12-14). He defines culture as the “decision-making heuristics, which typically manifest as values, beliefs and social norms” (p.1).

American writers’ stepping on African soil meant a synergetic process of immersion and commodification of cultural impulses. Ernest Hemingway engaged with Africa on two occasions, first in 1933 and then in 1954. His life story has already been marked by some of the larger world events in the first half of the 20th century and the African chapter was just the next missing piece of the puzzle. Hemingway’s African narratives are one of a kind in the plethora of works underlining the themes of love and death. The same themes bear different sensation when inspired by the other parts of the world where he traveled and resided. Bravery, gracefulness, the face of death all have different undertones when set in Spain, in Italy, Cuba, Turkey or Africa. Hemingway’s African growth can be examined step by step again in accordance with the cultural and natural landscape of the vast African land. Hemingway dissected the human nature by testing it for all possible near-death experiences at the time. His African case is a specific test of the human soul to respond to a completely new cultural and environmental setting and quickly react to possible difficulties or dangerous encounters during the African experience of the safari. Hemingway showed the effect of the African nature on the individual. The highest mountain top has been immortalized in the tails from “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and the blend of autobiography and fiction called *True at First Light*. The latter is based on a second safari Hemingway took in the 1950s. A longer, more complete version of this work was published posthumously under the title *Under Kilimanjaro*.

In 1933, Hemingway and Pauline went on a 10 -week safari to Kenya. The couple visited Mombasa, Nairobi, and Machakos in Kenya; then moved on to Tanganyika Territory, where they hunted in the Serengeti, around Lake Manyara, and west and southeast of present-day Tarangire National Park. During these travels, Hemingway contracted amoebic dysentery that caused a prolapsed intestine, and he was evacuated by plane to Nairobi, an experience reflected in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro". On Hemingway's return to Key West in early 1934, he began *Green Hills of Africa*, a non-fiction work published in 1935.

During his second trip to Africa in January 1954, Hemingway was almost fatally injured in successive plane crashes. He had chartered a sightseeing flight over the Belgian Congo as a Christmas present to his wife Mary. On their way to photograph Murchison Falls from the air, the plane struck an abandoned utility pole and was forced into a crash landing. Hemingway sustained injuries to his back and shoulder. Mary sustained broken ribs and went into shock. After a night in the brush, they chartered a boat on the river and arrived in Butiaba, where they were met by a pilot who had been searching for them. (Reynolds 2012, p.550). These experiences count for some of the most stunning and unbelievable events in a writer’s life and as such have been processed and transformed into the works of art that can be considered Hemingway’s African artefacts.

W. B. DuBois’ visit to Africa happened towards the end of his life when he had already gone through all the major American and world events, worked tirelessly on all African-American initiatives and led the major movements for the betterment of their position. He spread his wings of freedom across America and the world as a devout opponent of racial oppression.

Starting from his attendance of the First Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 (Lewis 2009, pp. 256–258), the Exhibit of Paris the same year (Lewis 2003, pp. 24–49), the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910 following the second National Negro Conference (Lewis 2009, pp. 263–264) his Atlanta Compromise engagement (Lewis 2009, pp. 180–181) and the following Niagara movement (Lewis 2009, pp. 215–216), his tour around the world including Germany, China, Japan (Lewis, p. 600), his engagement with the Back-to-Africa movement and Universal Negro Improvement Association (Lewis 2009, pp. 416–424), the African-American position during Great Depression and the WWII led to him being one of the three NAACP representatives at the 1945 conference in San Francisco at which the United Nations was established (Lewis 2009, p. 654). After the United Nations conference, Du Bois published *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace*, a book that attacked colonial empires. At the fifth Pan-African Conference in late 1945, Du Bois met Kwame Nkrumah, the future first president of Ghana, who later invited him to Africa (Lewis 2009, p. 661) but he only managed to get there in 1960, the “Year of Africa” since his passport has been confiscated by the U.S Government in 1951. During his visit to Ghana, DuBois started working on the idea of an encyclopedia about the African Diaspora called *Encyclopedia Africana*. However, he was already getting old and after two years there, he died in 1963 at the age of 95 in Accra, the capital of Ghana. At the president Nkrumah’s request, Du Bois was given a state funeral on August 29–30, 1963. As part of his legacy a crowd of 10,000 people in China stood in silence for three minutes, and major figures including Mao, Zhou Enlai, Soong Ching-Ling, and Guo Moruo sent messages of condolence to Du Bois’ wife Graham. DuBois’ life always echoed Africa and is an example of the osmotic and symbiotic process of cultural immersion. In be transparent in his engagement with the African-American plight in the USA.

Similarly, Langston Hughes also lived through the major American and world events in the first half of the 20th century. He was already an established African-American writer, essayist activist and leader of the Harlem Renaissance seeking to combat racism in America. Hughes stressed a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate. His thought united people of African descent and Africa across the globe to encourage pride in their diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. Hughes was one of the few prominent black writers to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists. (Rampersad. vol. 2, 1988, p. 297). With this, he inspired generations of writers of African descent, such as French-speaking African writers, Caribbean or South American. Hughes visited Africa several times, first in 1923 during a Europe and West Africa visit (Tracy 2004, p.142) traveling to places like Nigeria and Uganda to lead writing workshops and give talks. In Senegal, he delivered a key speech titled "Black Writers in a Troubled World," arguing that artists could articulate a Pan-African, anti-colonial stance. (Leigh Lichtenstein 2011). He was determined to promote the work of his peers on the continent after a 1962 visit to Uganda for a writers’ conference and meets Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and other rising African writers. In 1966 appointed by President Johnson, Hughes travel to Senegal for the First World Festival of Negro Arts. As the leader of the American delegation, Hughes speaks on “Black Writers in a Troubled World.” After a month in Senegal, Hughes tours other parts of Africa for the State Department. His early poetry, like *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, already connected African history and ancient civilizations to the African-American identity, a theme he continued to explore throughout his life (Tracy 2004, p.67). He compiled and edited important anthologies like *An African Treasury*

(1960) (Tracy 2004, p.199) and *Poems from Black Africa* (1963) to put African literature on the worldwide map.

Conclusion

The American writers and the African context hold accounts of vision, recognition, expression and attitude. The literature thus created offers insights into the deepest personal, national and international transformation. What they achieved was offering a lasting story of cultural upbeat about the unknown, hidden or deliberately concealed nature of the African continent. The three American writers confirm the thesis that national historical and economic changes are reflected in a culture. The moment of cultural immersion for the writers is a transformative experience that changes the person and their creative work forever. This served as a boost for all kinds of artistic movements and developments not only in the USA and Africa but also around the globe. The film industry took inspiration in such passages too. Consequently, all this proves that the cultural immersion leaves a lasting impact of artistic production as major cultural and historical records of the time.

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