

Homeland and Exile: The Poetic Imagination of Africa in the Black Diaspora

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Abstract

The realities of African poetic imagination and the quest for identity pervade the landscape of Black diaspora poetry. The poems of four diaspora writers: Edward Braithwaite, Audre Lorde, Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez and Nicolas Guillen, are purposively selected to trace and establish the oral roots, African poetic expressions and the use of Africa as a trope within the body of Black American and Caribbean literature. Texts from selected poems are subjected to descriptive and detailed analysis to reveal the presence of Africa and her poetic imagination. Black Aesthetic theoretical approach is favoured because it seeks to promote a black aesthetics, which is unique and revolutionary in its opposition to the dominant one, and which embraces black communities, black identities as well as their proud heritage. This paper concludes that in their quest for identity and visceral reconnection, diaspora Black writers have appropriated their African roots and cultural heritage in their works.

Keywords: Poetry; identity; Africa; black; diaspora.

Introduction

Poetry is a genre of literature that Africans are quite familiar with. African artists did not need colonialism or the introduction of writing in order to express themselves in the most literary way(s). Before colonialism, African literary outputs were inherently oral, well established and ubiquitous before the Whiteman ever set foot on the land. The oral history and background of literary expressions in Africa give African poetry some of its important features such as: lyricism, repetition, rhythm and the use of imageries encased in the cultures and traditions of African people at home and in the diaspora.

The obvious and undeniable fact is that written African poetry has become something that looks more like “written oral literature” (Ojaide, 1996:38), irrespective of its oral roots, because of the influence of writing, which itself is a colonial legacy. African poetry retains its socio-cultural and traditional background in its different forms, such as *Ijala, oriki* (of Nigeria), the *ewe dirge* (of Ghana), heroic and court poetries, to mention a few. The aforementioned poetic forms align with different public occasions and performances; and they also go a long way in confirming the oral ambience that surrounds poetry, which is expected to be read aloud for it to be enjoyed and appreciated.

African poets and their diaspora colleagues have been espousing and expounding the traditional oral roots of poetry. In spite of the accident of history that makes them write and speak in a plethora of foreign languages, these poets have learnt to produce poetry in these foreign languages but with strong African content and flavour. Some poets, notably Soyinka, Clark and Okigbo, have been accused by critics as being Eurocentric in aspects of language and style. However, the position of such critics does not vitiate the fact that the poems of Soyinka and co qualify as African poetry, because of the themes they espouse and the cultural heritage they represent. The language of African poetry should not be the essential yardstick with which it is judged; other factors like what Irele (2001:11) calls African poetry’s “essential force”, that is, “its reference to the historical and experiential” should also be considered as important factors in its classification. In other words, the muse of African poetry and its poets, whether at home or abroad, is in the motherland, Africa.

Toward a Black Aesthetics: Race, Ethnicity and Transnationalism

People of African ancestry are to be found today in different places like the Caribbean islands and the Americas as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, which forcefully transported millions of Africans to these far-flung places, where they are now citizens. Then of course the voluntary migration of Africans since the postcolonial era is another factor. These realities have birthed both literary and critical representations of Blackness, which are not monolithic. These realities have also conditioned the expression of what is

termed ‘authentic black aesthetic’. Since the “cultural identity of Blackness has become contentious intellectual property” (Gourdine, 2004: ix), it becomes imperative that such would ultimately produce a multiplicity of views across transatlantic boundaries of Blackness. More so, that, existing boundaries of identities within the body, Black, can be easily blurred, unjustly crossed, and sometimes, potentially violated either consciously or unconsciously.

It is these extant realities which ultimately breed the kind of intellectual difficulty inherent in any attempt to disconnect the link to the homeland, which Black writers everywhere seems to want to lay claim to. In an apparent conceptualisation of these realities and the resultant themes prevalent in Black literature, Gilroy (1993:34) opines that:

... themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject. This fragmentation has recently been compounded further by the questions of gender, sexuality, and male domination, which have been made unavoidable by the struggles of black women.

Hence, the importance of birthing a concept rooted in the idea of a black aesthetic, which promotes black culture, identity, return to root and black separatism in literature becomes inevitable.

The Black Aesthetic is defined as a literary tradition “borne out of the peculiar experiences, culture and values of Black people, fundamentally different from that of whites” (Mushengyezi, 2003:116). Birthed in America, alongside the Civil Rights Movement of that era, Black Aesthetic is not an ideological room which only harbours descendants of American ex-slaves alone. As an ideological movement, it embraces all Black diaspora persons in its desire to promote Black Nationalism and arts. It strikes a connection with Harlem Renaissance in the artistic expressions of racial pride, emphasising black heritage and a commitment to producing works that promote black culture and identity. Black aesthetic seeks to privilege the experience of marginalisation and racism which has been the lots of blacks in contemporary societies. Black artists in general were called upon to seek and promote an aesthetic, unique and revolutionary in its opposition to the white western one, and to embrace black communities as well as their proud heritage.

Following this nationalistic charge and an embrace of the ideas underpinning Black Aesthetic as an ideology and literary theory, Black diaspora writers began to express themselves using the ideologies embedded in black aesthetic. These expressions could be found across the three genres of literature: prose, poetry and drama in colourful words, imageries and symbolism. Thus, the influence of African cultural heritage on Black diaspora poetry – which is an expression of Black aesthetic – has been established in the works of poets like Edward Braithwaite, Nicolas Guillen, Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez and Audre Lorde. The areas of influence include but are not limited to adaptation of African myths and folktales, and the use of African oral tradition.

Since this is a qualitative study, a content analysis of selected poems is carried out to achieve the aim of showing how Africa is reflected and refracted in the poetic expressions of Diaspora Blacks. The procedure adopted involves reading, analysing and discussing the images of Africa and affiliated totems portrayed in the works of selected writers. The different perspectives of Africa and her poetic imagination given in the selected poems are subjected to purposive scrutiny in order to identify the recurrent theme that, Africa and her traditions serve as muse and recurrent theme in the works of Black diaspora writers. Some aspects of the poetry of these dispersed people have roots in Africa and share similarities with African poetry. Here again, a reference to the historical and experiential becomes pivotal in the interpretation and understanding of the works of poetry of dispersed Black people. Therefore, apart from the historical and experiential influences of slavery on these peoples, they also share with Africa, the same feeling of postcolonial disillusionment, socio-economic and political woes, poverty, and a psychological state of hopelessness and helplessness as persons caught in a cultural limbo.

Locating Africa in the Poems of Edward Kamau Braithwaite

The Caribbean poet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite is one diaspora poet, who has not forgotten his African roots and constantly looks back to those roots for his muse, tropes and cultural raw materials. The hermeneutics of his poems especially his first trilogy, *The Arrivants*, display an outstanding consciousness for language, history and his African roots. Brathwaite's poems draw inspiration not only from Africa, but also from black racial solidarity and the exploration of the condition of black people in the Caribbean islands, Africa and wherever they can be found. Instructively, Braithwaite's poems explore a common theme: the historical passage of Black diaspora people from the old world (Africa) to the new world (Caribbean islands and the Americas). The poems of Braithwaite are also foregrounded on his physical bonding with Africa by his stay in Ghana (where he lived and worked between 1955-1962); quite different from the ideological and metaphysical bonding achieved by some of his contemporaries. His bonding with Africa is not from an aesthetic distance like some of his contemporaries, but a bonding pronounced loudly in his poetry and the ritual of taking an African name "Kamau" during his sojourn in Ghana.

Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* is divided into three parts: *Rights of passage*, *Masks* and *Islands*, but they are quite inter-related in the explication of the thematic concerns of the poet. One of the thematic concerns of Braithwaite firmly rooted in the rhetorical question, "How did black people find themselves in the Caribbean?" Hence, the question posed in "The Return" by the poet, "whose ancestor am I?" (125). Finding the answer to this germane question is fundamental to understanding the poems in Braithwaite's trilogy, in which he travels between Africa and the Caribbean in a poetic quest for identity and understanding. Reinforcing the homeland vision of Braithwaite, Irele (2001:156), submits that the poems of *The Arrivants*:

... form a unified sequence centred on the African vision within Brathwaite's articulation of the comprehensive historical awareness that informs all his poetry, an awareness that takes root from an interrogation of the historical contingency of Black presence in the Caribbean and in the rest of the Americas.

Rights of Passage which is the opening part of the trilogy is symptomatic of the voyages that Africans underwent before finally being dropped off in the new world. The journey begins in Africa and terminates in the new world. The title of *The Arrivants*' first part also represents the historical 'Middle Passage' of the Slave Trade, when millions of Africans being taken to the new world die tragically at sea, without the benefit of decent burials on the ancestral land, but at the bottom of the ocean many miles away from home. The collective, painful experience of the journey is painted in the opening poem of *Rights of Passage* titled 'Prelude':

Dust glass grit
the pebbles of the desert:
sands shift:
across the scorched
world water ceases
to flow (4)

But earlier in the 'Prelude', the poet paints a vivid picture of pain, suffering and helplessness that accompanied him, on the journey to the New World:

Drum skin whip
lash, master sun's
cutting edge of
heat, taut
Surface of things
I sing
I shout
I groan
I dream (4)

The bitter irony of their journey and the eventual arrival in the New World is captured in the poem 'New World A-Comin':

with the wind and the water
the flesh and the flies
the whips and the fixed
far of pain in this chained
and welcoming port (11).

Whereas the first journey uproots the poet from his ancestral land, the second journey – which is more of a spiritual journey – takes him back there for a physical reunion. According to Irele (2001:159), the need for the poet to reconnect “with the physical and spiritual reality of the ancestral continent and with a universe of being that confirms the sacred compact between the poet as singular consciousness and the collective body of the race in its full historical personality” necessitates the journey.

The Braithwaite’s trilogy is full of images, imageries, memories and mimesis of Africa. The epic and lyrical nature of the anthology is represented in ‘Volta’ and ‘The Golden Stool’, which are images from Ghanaian geography (Volta Region) and the totem of tradition and kingship (Ashanti Stool). Like African oral artists, the poet opens the poem, ‘Volta’, with a dialogue between himself and the community; a kind of reassessment of the time between slavery and the poet’s symbolic return:

My lord, all this time since we left
Walata, you have led these people
Are you not tired?

I am very tired, Munia. My head
aches, my feet
are weary; sometimes
the light seems to sing before my face,
My blood cries out for rest (107).

The poet’s recalling of past deeds is an emotional and spiritual attempt to wrap the past as represented by the journey from home as a painful experience from which those who were taken have never and might never recover.

Braithwaite’s use of language is particularly telling of his desire to use the poems in *The Arrivants* as sources of reconnection between Africa and her Black diaspora. The registers of the three poems in the ‘Libation’ section of *Masks* show a sensibility to the cultural and historical importance of the poems’ thematic concern. The orality of the Akan people of Ghana is employed to show a vital link to Braithwaite’s African roots, which also bellies a near rejection of western poetic convention. In fact, that part of *Masks* opens with an Akan proverb that says “only a fool points at his father’s house with his left hand”. No other poem in this section best represents the Caribbean poet’s desire to recover and rediscover his ancestral sphere of poetic influence than ‘Atumpan’, the drum. The language and the material representations employed in the poem “establishes a formal correspondence between the aesthetic and normative significance of African orality” (Irele, 2001:160):

Kon kon kon kon
Kun kun kun kun
Funtumi Akore
Tweneboa Akore
Tweneboa Kodia
Kodia Tweneduru

Funtumi Akore
Tweneboa Akore
Spirit of the Cedar
Spirit of the Cedar Tree
Twebeboa Kodia

Odomankoma 'Kyerema says
Odomankoma 'Kyerema says
The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says
The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says

that he has come from sleep
that he has come from sleep
and is arising
and his arising

like *akoko* the cock
like *akoko* the cock who clucks
who crows in the morning
who crows in the morning

We are addressing you
ye re kyere wo

We are addressing you
ye re kyere wo

Listen
Let us succeed
Listen
May we succeed ... (98-99)

The poem is a rite of transformation for the poet as well as the poem because it marks a unique transition from the first part of trilogy, *Rights of Passage* to the second part, *Masks*. The tone of the poem in its invocation and other poetic manifestations such as rhythm and repetition, illustrates the conscious effort of Braithwaite to revive and relive the distant past of his African ancestry.

Braithwaite's reliance on the Akan people's (His adopted African tribe) oral tradition and literature populates his poems. The Akan myth of origin and the forceful, violent uprooting of his forebears is recounted in the poem 'Axum', together with the story about the eventual exodus of the Akan people to their present site in modern Ghana, which is represented in the following lines: "of kemalke/ burnt town, destroyed/villages, pillaging/and the next day moved on/till we reached the Red River..." (103). In 'Masks', the poet situates the troubled and disrupted history of the blacks in the Caribbean at the door steps of slavery and colonialism; experiences they share with their brothers and sister in Africa. In graphic words and with strong metaphors, the enslavement and colonial realities are painted:

Your tree
Has been split
By a white axe
of lightning
the wise
are di-
vided, the
eyes
of our elders
are dead (130)

The split tree is the decimated and desecrated ancestral homeland; the White Man is the 'white axe', which came with 'lightning' (guns, canons and other weapons of power) to devastate the Africa and to also divide and rule her peoples.

In the collection of poems under *Islands*, which is the concluding part of the trilogy, Braithwaite shows that despite this physical and poetic excursion to his ancestral past and history, he lives in the present and appreciates the historical nuances, which his Caribbean identity and environment have gifted him. This point is articulated in the opening lines of 'Islands':

So looking through a map
of the Islands, you see
rocks, history's hot
lies, rot-
ting hulls, cannon
wheels, the sun's
slums: if you hate
us. Jewels,
if there is delight
in your eyes.
The light
shimmers on water,
the cunning
coral keeps it
blue

Looking through a map
of the Antilles, you see how time
has trapped
its humble servants here. De-
scendants of the slave do not
lie in the lap
of the more fortunate
gods. The rat
in the warehouse is as much king
as the sugar he plunders.
But if your eyes
are kinder, you will observe
butterflies
how they fly higher
and higher before their hope dries
with endeavour
and they fall among flies (204).

However, the poet leaves diaspora Blacks with a glimmer of hope that the feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, which envelops the psyche of the average diaspora person, can in fact give way to possibilities. This hope is located in the tripartite themes of home, departure and return, which Braithwaite's trilogy, *The Arrivants*, represents in *Rights of Passage*, *Masks* and *Islands*.

Africa as a Trope in American Poetry

The influence of African cultural heritage on African-American poetry has been established in the works of African-American poets: Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez and Audre Lorde (all women). The areas of influence include but are not limited to adaptation of African myths and folktales, and the use of African oral tradition. The Harlem Renaissance is reputed to be the first major literary lighthouse, which pushed this influence in African-American poetry. However, the refusal of African-American poets to capitulate under a dominant/mainstream Anglo-Saxon literary culture stands as a greater testimony to their individual and collective struggle to retain and maintain a distinct identity.

In the collection of poems titled *Our Died Behind Us*, Lorde makes allusion to Yoruba and Fon myths of Nigeria and Benin Republic (formerly Dahomey). She claims female soldiers of the old Dahomey Empire

known as ‘Amazons’ as her ancestors. The poetess then treats the theme of cultural identity in the poem “The Winds of Orisha” in her anthology, *From Land Where Other People Live*. However, it is important to state that while African poetry is influenced by colonialism, the African-American poetic expressions have come under the influence of the experiences of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Sanchez’s “for unborn malcolms” in *Home Coming* shows not only the political side of the poetess, but it also serves as a warning signal to the white oppressors that, African-Americans are no longer ready to turn the other cheek when slapped. Sanchez declares with poetic fire:

git the word out
now.
to the man/boy
taking a holiday
from murder.
tell him
we hip to his shit and that
the next time he kills one
of our
blk/princes
some of his faggots
gonna die
a stone/cold/death
Yeah.

It’s time
an eye for an eye
a tooth for a tooth
don’t worry bout his balls
they al
ready gone (28).

The title of this poem “for unborn malcolms” is an allusion to the assassination of the Black Power leader, Malcolm X; who was a victim of a devaluation of Black life by the White hegemony.

The unique language of the African-American community is also reflected in their poetry. The kind of English used by this people is quite different from the conventional English language learned in schools. The language of the African-American community as reflected in some of its poetry is a unique one, which binds and differentiates an oppressed people; a folk language of identity, which protests and separates. According to Ojaide (1996:116), words like ‘git the word out/we hip to his shit/gonna die’ show that “the Black dialect has its own prosody and semantic register.” The manifestation of this folk language of identity is better seen in the heavy reliance of African American communities on slang; a kind of lingo-cultural identity. Rodgers’ *how I got ovah* is a good example of this distinct poetic expression in language.

The African roots and heritage of African-American poetry are also well articulated in Lorde’s use of African incantatory style in her poem “Call”. The language and style of this poem shows a leaning towards African ritual performance. The colouring of the poem with a ritual language and ambience illustrates the poetess’ desire to bring African and African-American women together on the altar of shared experience and origin. The poem does this through a referential pointing at important female figures in both communities:

I may be a weed in the garden
of women I have loved
Who are still
Trapped in their season
But even they shriek
As they rip burning gold from their skins
Aido Hwedo is coming

We are learning by heart
 What has never been taught
 You are my given fire-tongued
 Oya Seboulisa Manu Afrekete
 And now we are mourning our sisters
 Lost to the fake hush of sorrow
 To hardness and hatchets and childbirth
 And we are shouting
 Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer
 Assata Shakur and Yaa Asantewa
 My mother and Winnie Mandela
 Are singing
 In my throat
 The holy ghost linguist
 One iron silence broken
 Aido Hwedo is calling
 Calling
 Your daughters are named
 And conceiving
 Mother loosen my tongue
 Or adorn me
 With a lighter burden
 Aido Hwedo is coming
 Aido Hwedo is coming
 Aido Hwedo is coming (74-75)

By placing African and African-American women side-by-side, the poet indicates African-Americans affinity to their roots. The repetition that ends the poem underscores its ritual and African element. The history, culture and the experience of oppression that connects these two groups of people are responsible for some of the similarities in their poetic expressions. In this sense, one cannot but agree with Ojaide (1996:115) that "African-American poetry is utilitarian and didactic like Modern African Poetry." Although areas of convergence between the two can be found at the level of syntax, sound pattern, themes and images, these similarities are much more pronounced at the last two levels.

Another poet who showcases his African cultural heritage in poetic expressions is Cuban poet, Nicolas Guillen. The African element in his poetry is pronounced vis-à-vis his employment of certain Yoruba poetic tradition in some of his poems. It is a well-known fact that despite the harsh realities of slavery and the oppression that followed, the Yoruba language is one African language that has managed to survive in places like Brazil, Haiti, the Caribbean and Cuba. The question to ask is: "How did the Yoruba language survive out of the many African languages that the slaves took with them to the New World?" Perhaps, it can only be a guess that the survival of Yoruba language is traceable to the high number of Yoruba people sold into slavery, and matched by the slaves' ability to maintain a kind of fraternity especially in Cuba, where it reflects in poetry. To buttress this point, Yai (2001:298-299) opines that "The African element emerged in Cuban poetry as soon as the blacks who had been shipped there from Africa had increased sufficiently in number to organize themselves in *cabildos* or *naciones*, kinds of fraternities comprising slaves of the same ethnic background." The slaves' ability to live together and fraternise along the line of ethnicity, together with a higher population of Yoruba slaves, remains a strong incentive for the survival of Yoruba language in Cuba and surrounding countries.

The concern here is not on whether Yoruba language is still being spoken in Cuba. Rather it is on the use of elements of Yoruba cultural ethos and linguistic style in the poetry of Guillen, who does not hide his affection for his ancestry which is illustrated in the poetic lines written in Spanish, the official language of

Cuba: “Yoruba soy, Iloro en Yoruba lucumi (I’m Yoruba, I weep in Lucumi Yoruba)” (298, qtd in Yai, 2001). To Yai (2001:299), the poetry of Guillen “is the example of a happy marriage between reason and heart, between Spanish and Yoruba poetry” (299). Quite instructively, some scholars like Yai (2001) have identified a convergence between Yoruba and Spanish in their phonic characteristics, where they share similarities in vowel and consonant sounds pattern.

Guillen’s poems can be better enjoyed when read because a Yoruba listener with some level of literary competence will be left with a feeling of having listened to a direct translation of a Yoruba poem in Spanish. The concept of *pregon* (a street vendor’s announcement of his/her wares) undoubtedly has its etymology in Yoruba street trading mannerisms. For example, Guillen’s *pregon*:

Quencuyere, quencuyere

quencuyere
Quencuyere, que la casera
salga otra vez
Sangre de mamey sin venas
y yo que sin sangre estoy,
Mamey p’al que quiera sangre
que me voy
Quencuyere quencuyere
quencuyere

Quencuyere, the seller offers again
 blood of mamey without veins,
 there are people without blood
 Mamey for him who wants blood
 before I pack up and go.

The chanting of wares or what can be called street/mobile advertising of goods is a common feature of the Yoruba trader. Yai (2001:305) submits that the words of the first two lines of the foregoing poem are of the kind “one is bound to hear under the same circumstance from the mouth of a Yoruba market seller”; something like “Oniguguru de o”, which translates in English as “The popcorn seller is here o.” The last line is equally of a similar extraction and of concern here because it wears the cultural toga of a Yoruba trader’s last call on prospective customers before s/he departs for home or the next point of sales. The Yoruba version will sound like this: “Oniguguru n rele o” (The popcorn seller is leaving or going home). Beyond this fact, other Yoruba cultural and literary elements abound in the poetry of Guillen. These elements include the *ofo* genre in his poem ‘Sensemaya’, which stands for a ‘chant to kill a snake’ in which the *ofo* style of repetition is maintained; the *oriki* genre in ‘Ebano real’ which is a salute to a royal tree; the use of Yoruba hunter’s chant, *ijala*; and the rhythm that underlines some of his poetry. What all these stylistics and thematic devices show is a genuinely conscious attempt by Guillen to perpetuate the African nay Yoruba literary tradition, outside the homeland.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Clearly, the attempts and the efforts of diaspora black poets/poetesses, who are scattered across disparate geographies, represent their genuine desire to reconnect with their roots. Therefore, the poets together with the works analysed in this article find expression for the reality of cultural limbo in which many diaspora writers have found themselves. Separated from the homeland (Africa) by both history (slavery) and geography, many diaspora beings/writers long for manumission to escape the cultural quagmire of being caught between a hyphenated identity; an identity which places emphasis on the right side of the hyphen. Invariably, the search for identity, longing for home and attempts at visceral connection with Africa are visible tropes in the literature of these distinct and dispersed peoples. These poetic works of the Black diaspora have also given African poetic expressions an international flavour. It is welcoming that the muse no longer belongs to the *homeland* alone: the *exiles* are not left out of the rich and distinct literary tradition.

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