



CAROLINE DE CRESPIGNY

"Not Enough Night"

Negritude's evasive ethos

"At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night . . . There was excitement and the air was filled with the vibration of really joyous life that knows nothing of disappointment and 'white sorrows' and all that."

SEEKING TO ESCAPE from an intolerable sense of deadness, of alienation, many contemporary writers, especially in the United States, are exploring life in terms of the "negritude" expressed in the above passage from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The negro is in some way—it is the purpose of this article to suggest in *what* way—felt to be free from the crushing pressures to conformity which have, perhaps, been most explicitly described by Norman Mailer in his now famous essay on "The White Negro". Summarising "negro"—and "white negro"—attitudes under the umbrella term "Hip", Mailer writes:

"One is Hip or one is Square (the alternative which each new generation coming into American life is beginning to feel.) One is a rebel or one conforms, one life is a frontiersman in the wild west of American nightlife or else a Square cell trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society—doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed."

It is felt by many American "Beat" writers that the negro inhabits a special world of emotional freedom—a world which they themselves seek desperately to enter through "kicks" in the way described by Alan Ginsberg in his poem, "Howl".

"I saw the best minds of my generation, destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn, looking for an angry fix."

Jazz, of course, is a form in which, to many other writers as well as the "Beats", this "negro" spontaneity and un-alienation is expressed with particularly immediate intensity. It is interesting that two such different writers as Sartre and John Osborne should (in *La Nausée* and *The Entertainer*) present their alienated heroes as feeling a momentary, overwhelming cathartic relief on listening, in each instance, to a negro jazz singer.

This is how Nadine Gordimer, in *A World of Strangers* describes a party in Sophiatown:

"I had seen jazz crazy youths and girls at home in England, in a frenzy of dance-hall jive. But the jazz in this room was not a frenzy. It was a fulfilment, a passion of jazz. Here they danced for joy. They danced out of wholeness, as children roll screaming down a grass bank.

"Their joy was something wonderful and formidable, a weapon I did not have. And, moving feebly among them, I felt the attraction of this capacity for joy as one might look upon someone performing a beautiful physical skill which one has lost or perhaps never had. Lopped off, gone, generations ago; drained off with the pigment fading out of our skin, I understood, for the first time, the fear, the sense of loss there can be under a white skin."

It is interesting to compare this romantic passage with a passage from James Baldwin's *Another Country*. Ida, a negro woman is dancing with her white lover.

"Ida had begun a new cruelty. Ida was suddenly dancing as she had probably not danced since her adolescence, and Ellis was attempting to match her—he could certainly not be said to be leading her now, either. He tried, of course, his square figure swooping and breaking, and his little boy's face trying hard to seem abandoned. And the harder he tried—the fool! Cass thought—the more she eluded him, the more savagely she shamed him. He was not on those terms with his body, or with hers, or anyone's body. He moved his buttocks by will, with no faintest memory of love, no hint of grace; his thighs were merely those of a climber, his feet might have been treading grapes. He did not know what to do with his arms, which stuck out at angles to body as though they were sectioned and controlled by strings, and also as though they had no communion with his hands—hands which had grasped and taken but never caressed. Was Ida being revenged? or was she giving him warning? Ellis' forehead turned slick with sweat, his short curly hair seemed to darken, Cass almost heard his breathing. Ida circled round him, in her orange dress, her legs flashing like knives, and her hips cruelly grinding. From time to time she extended to him, his fingers touched, her lean, brown, fiery hand. Others on the floor made way for them—for her: it must have seemed to Ellis that the music would never end."

Here, Nadine Gordimer's "weapon" is being used—against "white" inhibition and constriction. (The sexual aspects of this "white" inhibition—"black" flow contrast have been explored by many writers—among them Jack Kerouac, in his novel, *The Subterraneans*, where the hero's "white"

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coldness is recognised as the factor which breaks up his relationship with a negro girl.)

TO ILLUSTRATE what I believe to be essential attitudes behind this mystique of negritude, I am reminded of two episodes observed in Cape Town buses during this past month. On the first occasion, a lorry loaded with African workers pulled up, in a traffic jam, behind the bus in which I was sitting—and the bus was suddenly filled with their vital, spontaneous song. On the second occasion, a drunk white woman got into a bus and started to cry and moan hysterically. On both these occasions, the reaction of the white passengers was the same—shock, uneasiness, disapproval with an admixture of smug, sniggering amusement. Bourgeois reserve predictably responded to the raising of a curtain—whether what was revealed was, as in one instance, something natural and joyful or, as in the other, something nakedly, neurotically desperate.

I believe that, in any of the quotations cited above, the word “bourgeois” could quite effortlessly be substituted for the word “white”—in Kerouac, in Mailer, in Nadine Gordimer, even in Baldwin. Why does the negro fulfill this particular role as a vehicle for anti-bourgeois protest? Because, in both the United States and in South Africa, economic colour discrimination has prevented the negro from becoming integrated into the bourgeoisie which provides the “national” values. He has been spared the corrosive pressures of total bourgeois alienation.

The white writers who express the mystique of negritude are in a different position. They are revolting from *within* the bourgeoisie—and in its terms of individual nonconformity. There are elements of Rousseau’s concept of the Noble Savage—through a parallel with Baudelaire and

Rimbaud is a far more exact one. Working in terms of their society, they inevitably tend to see negro “freedom” in terms of bigger and better “kicks”. The protest is therefore a highly confused one. It does not analyse causes or suggest solutions. The basic problems of a sick society remain untackled.

It should be noted here that the same criticism can be applied to African negritude. Reading the almost hysterical lyricism of Chisiza’s Africanist praise poem in a previous issue of *The New African*, we can see it as a very natural reaction to the “white” values imposed by centuries of colonialism, an assertion of national pride which is probably an essential element in a national liberation struggle. But we have only to examine what our reactions to it would be, if it had been written in terms of “whiteness” instead of “blackness”, to see that it is, ultimately, without direction.

It is significant, in this context, that those whites who support Pan-Africanism are usually those who do not desire any fundamental change in society and whose social planning takes them no further than an abolition of the “colour bar”—which amounts, in fact, to applying first-aid dressings to a wound which requires surgery.

To quote lines written by William Empson in quite another context: “Slowly the poison the whole bloodstream fills. The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.” While the fact that white negritude’s exponents should actually envy those who are suffering acute oppression starkly demonstrates the moral and emotional vacuum existing in certain societies, “not enough night” is a complaint for which it is hard to feel great sympathy in “the harsh light of common day”. As an ethos, negritude remains essentially an evasion. ●

AFRICANA

- “He (Kerina) is wanted in South Africa on several serious carnal charges, and I can tell you that he is still active in his subversive activities against this country.”—Security Branch Chief, Colonel H. J. J. van den Bergh, *Sunday Express*. [P.R.]
- It is my belief that in 20 years time there will be a white population here of 15 million. The growing trend is for the better class of Europeans to escape their dreary countries for our sunshine, leaving them to the socialists and West Indians. Who could blame them?—Editor, *Cape Times Weekend Magazine*. [V.G.]
- At his daily family prayer meeting a burly 48-year-old farmer prayed for the soul of an African he is accused of having beaten to death with a sjambok and a length of hosepipe, the Circuit Court was told at Potchefstroom yesterday.—*Rand Daily Mail*. [Anon.]
- It is a signal contribution to an understanding of the race problem. A scholarly effort to put the issues of race inside the framework of Western traditions and world history. What “Race and Reason” does is to help the ordinary man-in-the-street understand that the tremendous, unthinking drive to force equality strikes at the foundations of national freedom.—Book review in *baNtu*. [R.F.]
- “I used to be very fond of Dickens and Goldsmith and of the later writers I read every book of Lawrence Green.”—Mr. N. J. le Roux, Chairman of the present Board of Censors and a member of the newly-appointed Publications Board, interviewed by the *Cape Times*.

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