

# The Navigation of Afrocentricism in Countee Cullen’s “Heritage” and “Incident”: The Poetics of Identity

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper brings forward the course and determination of Afro-American people toward their origin as experienced by African Americans. It remarkably remaps the poetics of identity amid the racial segregation as projected in Countee Cullen’s “Heritage” and “Incident.” Further, it deals with the color line discrimination over enslaved community and fabricated knowledge about their history as problematic of research. Because the slavery system has belittled Afro-Americans and alienated them from their atavistic culture so that they fail to enjoy human dignity and identity. My purpose, here, is to delve into the issue of color discrimination that not only hems the Afro- American community but also dislocates them from their heritage. Largely, this paper navigates their alienated position amid the vast opportunities of material progress in America. Moreover, this paper intends to go through the genealogical studies of the race as envisioned by Paul Gilroy and W.E.B. Du Bois who advocate for enslaved community’s dignity and identity. Admittedly, genealogical history of the race takes the Afro-American people back to the time before ‘the slave trade’ era when they were happy and free enjoying their culture and language with human dignity in their atavistic land, Africa.*

**Keywords:** race, identity, segregation, double consciousness, and Afrocentricism

## **Introduction: Evolution of Race Theory: A Bird-eye View**

To revisit the highly contested race issue in identity politics is worthy here since both of the poems, “Incident” and “Heritage” by Countee Cullen subscribe it. In the poems the narrators explicitly pine for atavistic African land and its rich heritage to build up the counter culture of color line discrimination. In so doing, they attach themselves genetically with African race and identity which they feel blurred in America due to the notion of white man supremacy. In seeking their social dignified position in American society they valorize their genetic and cultural origin which is Africa, prior to the time of slavery. In fact, slavery practice, precisely denigrates and ignores human identity. Rather it promotes dehumanization and relegation of the slave, an inferior race. Race is the classification of people on the basis of human biology which the eugenics of 19<sup>th</sup> century also links with the biological traits of the community. Yet, this classifications of human beings on the basis of biological traits are social construct. Wright and Rogers, critics of race theory also encapsulate race as:

... racial classifications are generally tied to observable physical differences between people, the apparent naturalness of race seems obvious to most

people. This conception reflects a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of racial classifications. Race is a social category, not a biological one. Racial classifications generally use inherited biological traits as criteria for classification; nevertheless, how those traits are treated and how they are translated into the categories we call races is defined by social conventions, not by biology. (313)

They markedly elaborate the traditional and biological outlook to look into the issue of race while linking it with social construct more than heredity. On the other hand, it is regarded as the outdated perspective that subscribes the biological determinism of race; different races have their natural but fixed features. Additionally, eugenics in 19<sup>th</sup> century notoriously known as “pseudoscience” which helped to stereotype and downgrade Black community. It also allegedly claimed that such people can be improved via “carefully controlled breeding programs” (Lane 393). Dismaying fact is that it gave rise to the notion of superior and inferior races; which is the foundation of European colonialism.

In consort with it, in *Paradoxes* Marx Nordau, a critic, has a bleak vision of the racial discrimination. He remaps the white supremacist European attitude as: “. . .the colored races . . . are of necessity doomed, first of all to be dislodged by the son of white race and then to be annihilated” (337). His is the concern of deeply rooted racial essentialist view of colonizers to annihilate the identity of the colored community by declaring them as their natural foe. Alleged that this racial bias naturally led colonial agencies to create inequality, displacement and let alone genocide. American slavery, European colonialism, and Nazi’s holocaust vehemently testify the racial essentialism; white is naturally superior to other, regardless the fact that human beings fall under same homo sapiens species, which Nordau consolidates in *Paradoxes*.

Lane further remaps the race studies by pointing out the ethnic studies to fill in the gap between races. Indeed ethnic studies also deals with “shared ancestry, common origin, language and common practices” (394) and conversely it also does not incorporate all people equally. As long as people identify themselves different from other ‘race’ exist in the society. In this backdrop anti-racial discourse in America occupies the aesthetic and academic room as long as the racial disparity mounted there. Notably, Harlem Renaissance seems to be the byproduct of Jim Crow Law to resist the latter. The Harlem Renaissance is the racial epiphany of the Black community which navigates the acculturation of the forcefully dislocated and uprooted Africans in America and wishes to get rid of race induced injustice. In a nutshell, Harlem Renaissance is the counter culture launched by conscious Black writers and activists in 1920s and 1930s against slavery system in America.

One of the campaigners of Black Movement in America, Henry Louis Gates Jr.,

who deals with Nigerian Youruba myth, African American figures of signifying monkey, and trickster figures as the blacks' distinct identity. Similarly, Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) posits hybridized black subjectivity due to diaspora culture that hemmed the African-Americans via acculturation. While so doing he couples with W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness. Mainly his target is to decry the secondary role of the blacks in America despite their age long contribution to make America a prosperous nation/state. The maltreatment the blacks were facing which makes them feel American but Black slave despite the landmark verdict of Apex Court to end both legally and culturally rooted inequality prevailed in America in 1954 while hearing the case of "Brown v Board of Education" in 1954.

Unsurprisingly, the 'middle passage' routes during slave trade from Africa and Caribbean to Europe and America provide, however, some fluid space to Africans to know their subjected position to slavery. Awhile W.E. B. Du Bois's *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903) hints out the stranded position of enslaved Africans widely known as 'double consciousness,' which is the triad between "modes of thinking, being, and seeing (Lane 395). Here, thinking is heavily affiliated with conformist racial issue being linked with the position in a nation/state where Africans had had 'separate but equal' status backed up by Plessy v Ferguson (1896) verdict which provided ample space to apartheid Jim Crow Law. The third one out of triad is seeing which goes with the forceful diaspora expansion of Africans from Atlantic to Pacific ports. It primarily entails the fluid subjectivity of the Africans.

Undoubtedly, Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* largely explores the 'cultural matrix' of slaves and slave owners. His earlier syncretic vision of amalgamating enslaved community and post slavery in the maelstrom of European aesthetics takes a new turn and he adheres with Du Bois's 'double consciousness' which is the blacks' racial epiphany to look into the subjugated subjectivity and hybrid poetics under colonial project. Moreover, it drags him back to Du Bois's *The Negro* in which he deals with black subjectivity on the basis of color line which is racial essentialism, the approval of American apartheid. Through this step Du Bois intends to widen the horizon of "Pan-African movement" (Lane 396) to seek black solidarity outside America.

Coupling with Du Bois's Black consolidation, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* makes a deep investigation into the racial interpellation via language and acculturation. His contention is to go against the current of hybridity so that he deals with the trauma of dislocation and dispossession of black sojourners. In addition, he critiques on alienation and marginalization of those sojourners in *The Wretched Earth*. His radical idea encapsulates decolonization and use of force to beat racial hegemony that sustains enslaved people in perpetual low rank.

## **Countee Cullen and Apartheid in America**

Having been fostered at White's house, Countee Cullen comes in touch with racially awakened W.E.B. Du Bois whose daughter he marries. He falls apart from when he comes to know his upbringing an apartheid social practices in America. Enthused by Harlem Renaissance regardless his white foster parents' tutoring about slavery, he starts navigating his atavistic heritage. Additionally, having been fed up with race biased narrative that belittles him and his community, created by racist white, in regards to his skin color and African culture, he starts loving his people who were seared with 'separate but equal' precedence of 1896 of American Apex Court (Harry E. Groves 66). In fact, this verdict induced hell like apartheid and racial injustice in America. As Cullen faced the color line demarcation drawn by white supremacist, reach to the same conclusion to trace out their independent identity by dint of creative writing; poetics. Here, I argue that the reason for the poets recalling their pre-slavery days is the racial injustice and encroachment over their language and culture. Moreover, the lynching practice over blacks in America sharply mirrors the inhumane nature of white supremacist that causes the victims imagine their freedom and independent identity. It is a wonder that the poetic revival of atavistic heritage is the iconic and sublime beauty of imagination.

In writing, Cullen explicitly seeks for Afrocentricism because contemporary black subjectivity tinged with colonial experience and 'middle passage ordeals.' Middle passage is the route from Africa to Europe and America via it there was slave trade by European colonizers. In a way, this concept is to get rid of lynching law of America. Afrocentricism is a concept whereby it galvanizes the enslaved community and make them feel as free as prior to colonial slave trade. Richard J. Lane while reading Paul Gilroy elaborates it as: "Afrocentricism- a way of tracing black identity back to African origins as they existed before colonialism and slavery thereby "recovering" an authentic notion of self- also needs to be reconceptualized in the light of black modernist production" (424). To Lane Gilroy's contention is to undo the hybridized Black identity of contemporary America whereby racial injustice and slave travails always subjected them as a second class denizens. By defying subjugated position; the white/ black hierarchy his motto is to be absolutely free citizens. Afrocentricism, hereafter, helps Black community enjoy their original pattern of life, culture, and language without any hurdle.

### **Cullen: A High Priest of Harlem Renaissance Spirit**

Harlem Renaissance refers to the Afrocentrism or a movement of cultural awakening of Afro-American people who lived in White's land using various literary tools like music, dance, art, literature, etc. in the beginning of the twenties century. Through these tools, they express their root-cultures, feelings and

emotions for their revival, which give them aesthetic pleasure. Cullen is one of the priests to reveal such a notion through his poems “Heritage” and “Incident”.

Amid the whirlpool of racial discontent and the repercussions of Harlem Renaissance, movement of racial awareness of enslaved community in America Cullen takes poetics as the vehement tool of black aesthetics to go equal to main stream literature. Jane Kuenz, a race critic explains the objective of Harlem Renaissance as: “Though self-described as a rebirth of African American arts, the Harlem Renaissance fits squarely in a very American tradition that defines the authentic first as authentically *American*, by which is meant, most specifically, not British” (506). Hence it is not only the movement of enslaved community but also a campaign to set new American poetic identity.

Having been motivated by this movement, Cullen’s “Incident” and “Heritage” unbutton the racial repression and they seek Afro-Americans’ independent identity as well. Despite his well-off situation, he shares the ordeals of enslaved community and always writes on the issues of ‘alien and exile’ (Davis 390), that they bear in America. In fact Cullen is far away from Africa’s reality which Arthur P. Davies shares as: “Cullen, of course, knew nothing about the real Africa, and it was not necessary that he should. Africa in his poems is not a place but a symbol; it is an idealized land in which the Negro had once been happy, kingly and free” (390-91). As the poet is snared in American land because of his color of the skin which Du Bois calls ‘color line’ (Lane 396) prejudice since colonial history, he is segregated and bound to imagine atavistic land where his forebears were free and happy prior to slave trade.

Surprising fact is that in “Incident,” the setting is a wonderland of fairy tales. Just an eight years innocent narrator representing Black community in America is travelling there in Baltimore, America. His gaze falls upon the Baltimoreans with utmost smile and happiness. All of a sudden, a boy of his age, belonging to white community calls him “nigger” (“Incident” 8) and his romance disperses. This derogatory word pokes him in his heart and remains like an incurable wound. Now he is grown up and still he remembers that insult which his forebears had also borne since the starting of slave trade. While revisiting the history, what he gets is the racial discrimination induced by Jim Crow Law and white man’s supremacy. In this way he finds the hole in the heart of white rulers who teach their junior to go with color line segregation. The poet critiques the poetic situation as:

And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue and called me “Nigger,”  
I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December; (7-10)

Here the ‘poked out, tongue, and nigger’ words are heavily loaded with the sense

of white man's supremacy and 'separate but equal' (1896) verdict which even the small age white child knows by heart and shows his brute sharp nasty remarks to enslaved community. He thinks to have negritude is equal to servitude and a nigger should not look at him. On the prima facie, these words mirror the inhospitable milieu whereby the colored community survives under Damocles' sword, hostile situation. The word 'whole' ironically puns with 'hole' that the narrator sees in American white civilization that regards enslaved people hostile or enemy.

Edward Bland, a critic also reads Cullen's poem from the same plain. He sharply finds the historical harsh and brute behavior upon the slaves. He points out it as: "The Negro has a profound sense of his own humanity and his own adequacy. The whites, on the whole, however, challenge this self-appraisal. To them the Negro is a servile creature; and this state of mind exists to an influential extent within the white audience of the Negro poet" (229). By excavating history, he anchors the process of making slave people docile and servitude which is inhumanity.

In this way, "Incident" dramatizes the gap between two races which is deeply rooted in America. The poking out of the tongue by the junior white boy and his natural speaking 'nigger' that the narrator recalls is one of the fossils of lynching practice in America. In a nutshell, the poem displays the hostile and unfriendly environment for the blacks that they coped with in the past. The 'smile' of the narrator has been retorted by 'poke out tongue' that indicates that there was not humane and amicable relationship between the races in America. In tuning with this state of enmity between races, Walter C. Daniel remarks:

To my mind, there is no hope for the modern Negro in the way he is now going. Slavery lasted too long and ended too suddenly for the whites ever to forget and forgive enough to allow the black people into our sancta. Our state, our civilization is our own, for we made it. It is fair, as things in this partial world can be fair, that we should keep it, use it for ourselves, and shut the outcasts that we made away from it. (285)

Ironically, Daniel pokes out the gap between the races despite the achievement of the prosperous American. Admirable point of Cullen is that he has written this poem in quatrain stanza with iambic feet following the English tradition to make colonizers know the historical blunder they had made by belittling the enslaved community. By all means, it is considerably a politics of poetics for questing identity.

Likewise, in "Heritage" the narrator finds himself torn between Americanized African narratives and real history of America. The narrator subscribes Du Bois's 'double consciousness' as he was reared and fed by white Methodist. When he observes the Ku Klux Klan violence during American Civil war and on the verge



of Harlem Renaissance, he feels fed up with the episteme that he has been taught. Rather he likes to liberate from it by means of poetic imagination making Africa prior to slave trade his subject matter of poetics. The rhetorical topos behind “What is Africa to me” (“Heritage”1) seems incomprehensible to him though he has genetic linkage with her. He was taught that Africa is the savage land with barbaric people who had pagan God who were brought to Europe and America to civilize them under the motto of ‘Whiteman’s burden,’ a colonial project of homogenization. However, he regards these attributes not as the subject matter of disgrace but of glory and pride. He regards Africa similar to “Eden” (6) where Adam and Eve were happy and far away from power politics that creates inhumane episteme, white man’s supremacy.

From the onset, in “Heritage” Cullen has ironic tone when he recalls the subversion and disruption of Eden like African land by European colonizers. Their intrusion in Africa was the attempt to disrupt African heritage by uprooting and dislocating African from their culture and land. The narrator assumes his regal birth, “Strong bronzed men, or regal black/ Women from whose loins I sprang” (4-5) while glorifying his African forebears. His aim is to undo the fabricated history the colonizers made about Africa and Africans. He reminds the colonizers the sound and dignified position of his African predecessors before they were abducted for ‘slave trade’: “One three centuries removed/ From the scenes his fathers loved” (7-8). He indicts the colonizers by hinting the slave trade that started during Renaissance and by not treating them with humility. When this genealogical history goes into oblivion there will be Gilroy’s “Not a Story to Pass on” (Lane 424) to posterity.

Slave trade namely is the ‘living memory and slave sublime’ to pass to future generation which encapsulates the critical survival of the slaves and traumatic travails they bore in ‘middle passage.’ Thus, his deep concern with Afrocentricity defies the grand narratives which belittle his forebears’ ordeals to make America a nation/state. He does not entertain the hybrid position which Fanon names in his *Black Skin, White Mask* in which he deals with acculturation and diaspora maelstrom that erases history but creates fabricated history advocating colonial project. Assimilating it, Gilroy critiques: “. . . the pursuit of social and political autonomy has turned away from the promise of modernity and found new expression in a complex term that is often understood to be modernity’s antithesis” (425). To him Africology/Afrocentricism ensures the autonomy to enslaved community but it makes one forget the travails and trauma the enslaved community that is the topos of black poetics. Therefore, Africa is merely a symbolic imagination to defy racial atrocity in diaspora. Coupled with it Davis explains that:

Cullen implies that the Negro in America is a perpetual alien, an exile from a

beautiful sun-drenched Africa, his lost home land. As an alien, he suffers all of the insult, injustice and humiliation which unassimilated foreigners endure; and, as a consequence, he naturally possesses the mistreated alien's deep resentment against and distrust of his adopted country. For Cullen, the Negro is both a geographical and a spiritual exile. (390)

Though America is the homeland of Afro-Americans, they are treated as alien and endure legal, cultural, and social injustice. There African origin people are stuffed with censored knowledge that always looks them down as savage and tames them as docile servitude.

The most compelling fact is that the book and song written with colonial motif fortifies the white man supremacy and denounces the enslaved community. So the narrator tries to keep them at bay. He notes his dilemma:

Africa? A book one thumbs  
Listlessly, till slumber comes,  
Unremembered are her bats" (31-33)

The narrator immerses himself in the rhapsodic scenery and exotic beauty of the humid jungle as depicted in colonial writing and shows his mental dual whether or not to believe perpetrators narrative or rely on the uncontaminated atavistic land that his forebears had. Owing to African origin that appeases him and awhile frees him from American disgrace he likes to "Doff the lovely coats you wear" (42). Here coat is the stuff that hides out your real identity and helps you to show off that the poet likes to take off and be as nude as his ancestors who were "Jungle boys and girls in love" (51) sharing their true love which is the real African identity unlike the American treachery and unkindness to ex-slave community that has led the poet feel "writhing like the baited worm" (78). This is the affliction that he endures when his people forcefully went through Christian conversion. He laments at the cost of his 'double consciousness' linking his hybridity "Do I play double part" (98), and shows his angst "My conversion came high-priced" (89). He regrets high while reconciling with Christian upbringing at the cost of pagan culture "Heathen gods are naught to me" (92). The camouflage he has had badly deceived him because white people never turned out to be affable.

Finally after being swept by the deluge of white supremacy like the floating woods belonging to nowhere, he likes to go through penance because he had made blunder at the cost of forgetting his atavistic heritage and adopting American life. David Kirby rightly remarks: "Cullen's poem "Heritage," which I have called a black Waste Land because it deals with the same basic dilemma as the Eliot poem-that of the modern individual, aware of his rich heritage yet stranded in a sterile, conformist culture-and because it shares with that poem some similar imagery"



(14). The narrator is trapped between fire of anger and frustration of flood. To sum up, he is drawn by atavistic culture and American fetish culture. The more he remembers and learns his heritage the more he regrets. In a nutshell, it is a poetics of memory for quest of identity at the cost of American exclusion: "In the best way realized/ They and I are civilized" (127-28). The irony of his life is African origin people are still not included in mainstream of development which led them to go with Harlem Renaissance. The great reparation he has gone is the endorsement of lying himself of being Christian and living in civilized America "So I lie" (11) because neither of them appease and save him from racial violence. As his assumption of acculturation turns out to be regressive he bewails that "I can never rest at all" (73). The cause of his restlessness is being outnumbered in American mainstream culture. Upon navigating the whole range of Cullen's poetry Bertram L. Woodruff finds not only alienation but also pursuit of happiness:

Upon the first casual reading, Cullen's attitude toward life seems to be a pessimistic one. In moods ranging from witty irony to cynical realism, he writes of the transience of life.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we may have in this life, where all things must change, a short hour for happiness. But to be happy, even for a time, a man must snatch his happiness when and where he may find it. (214)

Woodruff points out the pessimistic tone mixed with aggression in Cullen's poetry. As life in America for his community is 'separate but equal' and happiness in life seems to be scarce so he uses irony and tries to use *carpe diem* for snatching happiness in the hostile situation.

### **Conclusion: Afro-Americans' Pang of Uprootedness**

To sum up, both of the poems explicitly display identity vacillation via the historical injustice imposed upon Afro-American community. Cullen revisits the genealogical history and anchors the events e.g.; forceful kidnapping, dislocation, religious conversion, biting racial gaze, unfamiliar language, ordeals in middle passage as well as in plantation camps, and let alone the lynching act. All these disparities project the pathetic trauma of enslaved community which Cullen dexterously remaps to show their oscillated identity. Consequently, the narrator to escape from the harsh racial atrocity, which has jettisoned his community, takes the help of poetics to go back to Africa prior to the time of 'slave trade' thereby he expects, he would enjoy regal freedom in serene wilderness listening to the ditty of the birds like his great grandparents. His memory of African atavistic heritage and culture ensures him a safe haven symbolically where he can enjoy the unprecedented degree of happiness which is the sublime aesthetics of black poetics. Above all he pines for atavistic heritage to adhere with his racial identity which he gets abjected and devalued in America because of his African color line.

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