

The Harlem Renaissance and African Cosmology: Trees and Rivers in Selected Poems of Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen

African cosmology has been a major source of inspiration to African American writers, and specifically to the poets of the Harlem Renaissance. This article, which is informed by myth criticism and some tenets of the Harlem Renaissance, studies Toomer's "Song of the Son," Cullen's "Heritage" and Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in a bid to demonstrate that in these poems, trees and rivers are first and foremost expression of freedom, even if they stand as metaphors for ancestry. Their significance therefore deviates from the original meanings that they are usually given in African cosmology. Toomer, Hughes and Cullen use trees and rivers not only to revisit the past, but essentially to declare their independence from the stifling tradition-bound culture of their homeland (Africa), and the race-bound culture of their host land (America). In other words, trees and rivers outline the role of revolutionary literature, which liaises between the past and the present that it interrogates. In their poems, the authors build a cultural space that is more oriented towards the present and the future. They thus assert their transnational/transcontinental identity as African Americans. This assertion finds a resonant echo in the ever-changing highly globalized twenty-first-century world.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, African cosmology, trees, rivers, transnational identity

Introduction

Trees and rivers have impacted on the American writers' representation of immigrants, in general, and black immigrants in particular in the context of my article. In "Greenery as a Symbol of Immigrant Hardship and Vulnerability in Gish Jen's TYPICAL AMERICAN," published in *The Explicator* (76:1, 2018, 28), Savannah Harper discusses trees and grass as metaphors for American and Chinese identities. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Mark Twain associates the slave Jim's quest for freedom to the Ohio River. As for trees, the dark forest is used by Eugene O'Neill in his play *The Emperor Jones* (1920) to represent the black Emperor Jones's subconscious, while Toni Morrison utilizes the tree on Sethe's back in *Beloved* (1987) to picture the dehumanization of the black female slave.

Trees and rivers have symbolic meanings in African cosmology that Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu defines as

the way Africans perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe; the lens through which they see reality, which affects their value systems and attitudinal orientations; it is the African's search for the meaning of life, and an unconscious but natural tendency to arrive at a unifying base that constitutes a frame of meaning often viewed as *terminus a quo* (origin), and as *terminus ad quem* (end). This cosmology is the underlying thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social

conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies. (Kanu, *Filosofia Theoretica*, 2013, 533)

Cosmology, as “the underlying thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies,” is a key determinant in the way the African perceives the world, orients himself/herself in it, and seeks to understand and be a part of it. Archetypal patterns thus play a major role— as they do in the cosmologies of other cultures— in the “African’s search for the meaning of life,” its origin and end. This search is obvious in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance.

Arna Bontemps notes that among other factors that spurred the Harlem Renaissance were two poems written by two young black teenagers: Cullen’s “I have a rendezvous with Life (with apologies to Alan Seeger),” published in January 1921 in *The Magpie*, the literary magazine of DeWitt Clinton School, and Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” published six months later in *The Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Bontemps, 1975, 10-11)¹.

As Henry Louis Gates et al. purport, The Harlem Renaissance, which spanned the decade of the 1920s, was the extraordinary creativity in the arts for black Americans and much of that creativity found its focus in the activities of African Americans living in New York City, particularly in the District of Harlem.[...] Expressed in various ways, the creativity of black Americans undoubtedly came from a common source— the irresistible impulse of blacks to create boldly expressive art of a high quality as a primary response to their social conditions, as an affirmation of their dignity and humanity in the face of poverty and racism. (Gates et al., 2004, 953)

Affirming their dignity as Blacks and human beings was a bounden duty to the pioneers of this movement. Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Rudolf Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston ranked among the pioneers. However, this Renaissance was also influenced by writers and intellectuals such as James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, and Charles S. Johnson. The literature, especially the poetry of this movement, explored African myths to assert the African American’s dignity and humanity.

My analysis of the poems will therefore utilize myth criticism and its concept of archetypal images and patterns. Philip Wheelwright views archetypes as universal symbols found in various mythologies. In *Metaphor and Reality* (1962), he observes that “certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among

1 them (111). Wheelwright's contention establishes the universality of myths and
2 archetypal patterns.

3 Yet in the case of the African and African American archetypes, there is a
4 causal connection. Many African slaves carried overseas their original myths
5 and archetypes, which they used to explain their living conditions in America.
6 As David Leeming and Jake Page contend,

7
8 the myths of African Americans have generally reflected the conditions of
9 blacks in America, first as slaves and then as people rejected by the
10 melting pot. The Africans brought to America as slaves naturally brought
11 religious traditions with them, and they also tended to reinterpret the
12 rituals, myths, and other religious traditions of their owners to fit their own
13 needs and their own heritage. (Leeming & Page, 1999, 58)

14
15 It is precisely the African Americans' reinterpretation of the original
16 African myths and archetypes that this article will examine in a bid to address
17 the following questions: What are the original meanings of trees and rivers in
18 African cosmology? "What is the significance of these elements in the selected
19 poems of the Harlem Renaissance?" "Does the poets' reinterpretation of these
20 archetypes build bridges between American and African cultures? The
21 answers to these questions will be based on the argument that Jean Toomer,
22 Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes reinterpret African myths and archetypes
23 to assert their African American identity. Trees and rivers, which have many
24 other connotations in African cosmology, are therefore used as quest for and
25 achievement of freedom in the poems selected. The three poets blend the
26 original African myths and archetypes and those of their European American
27 host culture. They adulterate African and American cosmologies to declare
28 their independence from the backward traditions of their homeland and the
29 racist attitudes of their host land. Trees and rivers are thus metaphorical
30 explorations of the connections between the past and the present.

31 David K. Kirby in "Countee Cullen's 'Heritage': A Black Waste Land,"
32 in the *South Atlantic Bulletin* (1971), Jean Wagner in *Black Poets of the United*
33 *States* (1973), and Rachel Blau Duplessis, in *Genders, Races, and Religious*
34 *Cultures in Modern American Poetry* (2001) have discussed the relationship
35 between Cullen's "Heritage" and Africa and the latter's significance for the
36 African American. In "Les grands thèmes de la poésie de Countee Cullen" /
37 "The Major Themes of Countee Cullen's Poetry," in *La Renaissance de*
38 *Harlem: écrivains noirs des années 20* (1975), Nicholas Canaday Jr. probes
39 into Cullen's religious background, a bequest from Reverend Frederick Asbury
40 Cullen, a pastor of the African Episcopal Methodist Church of Salem in
41 Harlem. Among the major themes of Cullen's poems, Canaday cites religion,
42 love, death, the opposition between Christianity and paganism, race and color
43 line. It is precisely the latter theme that is at the heart of "Heritage."

44 Ronald E. Sheasby, comparing Cullen's "Heritage" and Blake's "The
45 Tiger" in "Dual Reality: Echoes of Blake's Tiger and Cullen's Heritage," in
46 *College Language Association Journal* (1995), highlights the influence of the
47 latter poem on the former. He also points out that water imagery prevails in

“Heritage.” Michael L. Lomax’s “The Singing Man Who Must be Reckoned With’: Private Desire and Public Responsibility in the Poetry of Countee Cullen,” published in *African American Review* (2000), contends that Cullen’s poem expresses his in-betweenness and “colored-ness in a world of whiteness (Par. 2).

As for Toomer’s “Song of the Son,” Bernard W. Bell in his article “Portrait of the Artist as High Priest of Soul: Jean Toomer’s *Cane*,” quoted in Turner (1988, 223-227), explains the contrast between the educated and uneducated Blacks, the connection between the poem, the spirituals and the work songs, as well as the bond between the poet and his land Georgia. Toomer probed into the life of the Southern black farmer as Lucinda H. MacKethan posits in “Jean Toomer’s *Cane*: A Pastoral Problem” (Turner, 1988, 229-237).

Many critics have studied “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in relation to his author’s life experience. Arnold Rampersad examines the poem’s setting and its link with Hughes’s life, as well as the imagery and the diction of the poem in *The Life of Langston Hughes* (1988). In *Black Poets of the United States* (1973), Jean Wagner notes that “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” heralds “the existence of a mystic union of Negroes in every country and every age.” As for Onwuchekwa Jemie, he relates the rivers in Hughes’s poem to God’s immortality and their relation to black history, while Rachel Blau Duplessis links the Mississippi river to American history.

Although it utilizes some of the critical analyses aforementioned, my article, unlike the previous works, will focus on trees and rivers as archetypal patterns in the revolutionary poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and their relationship to African cosmology.

I Trees and Rivers in African Cosmology

Trees and rivers are intricately connected to human life. Various cultures associate them with man’s essence, existence, morals and spirituality. In Greek mythology, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, gained possession of Athens because she offered an olive tree to the city, unlike Poseidon, the god who resorted to violence (Mavromataki, 1995, 14). In some Cameroonian tribes, conflicts are settled by a green plant, referred to as the “peace tree,” usually offered to conflicting parties in a bid to terminate their squabbles.

Trees and rivers are archetypes with various symbolic meanings: rivers symbolize “death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of the life cycle; incarnations of deities” (Guerin et al., 1999, 161). As for trees, J.E. Cirlot, purports that “In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality” (Cirlot, 1962, 328; quoted in Guerin et al., 1999, 165).

Mbiti recaptures some of these meanings in his discussion of rivers and trees in African cosmology. He posits that in African mythologies, the

Zambesi, Congo and Niger rivers have been considered both causes of floods and sources of life, while in

some areas, people personify rivers and streams, or attribute divinities or major spirits to them. [...] Oceans, seas, lakes and permanent ponds are often thought to be inhabited by spirits or divinities who generally have to be propitiated when people are using the water in one way or another. Examples of this are reported in all parts of Africa. (Mbiti, 1989, 54)

Personifying rivers gives them a human dimension and thus relates them to divinities and spirituality in African cosmology. The sacrifices and the prayers usually addressed to these divinities bridge the gap between the rivers, the people and the spirits that inhabit these rivers. In this instance, rivers are a life-giving force, and a symbol of placation and harmony.

Talking about trees, Mbiti observes that mythical trees feature in a number of stories. Trees are associated in some African tribes with the expressions “tree of life” (the Herero tribe), “the forbidden tree,” the origin of man’s life, “the (wild) fig tree is considered sacred by many societies all over Africa, and people make offerings, sacrifices and prayers around or under it. There are sacred groves and other trees, including the sycamore and the baobab, used for religious purposes or associated with God and other spiritual beings” (51). Similarly, Eloise Brière examines the connotations of trees and rivers in *Le roman camerounais et ses discours*. She contends that in Mongo Beti’s *Remember Ruben*, there is a sort of symbiosis between man and tree, as the latter is part of the human condition. The tree thus denotes roots, quest for identity, legitimacy of power, and active participation in the fashioning of human destiny (Brière, 1993, 57-62). To Brière, the river in Mongo Beti’s novel plays the same role as the tree in human life and destiny: Water—especially that of the rivers—sometimes serves as symbol of life in *Remember Ruben*” (78). However, the river is not just a metaphor for life in African cosmology; it is also the ultimate space where men commune with their ancestors.

Brière establishes the link between the tree and water thus:

The tree is the double (counterpart) of man, of the sacred vital force that he must monitor in order to master the forces of dissolution that are present in water. It is in his wooden coffin that man identifies himself for the ultimate time with the tree before joining his dead ancestors in their last aquatic abode under water. (84)²

The man-tree-water trilogy in the above statement is essentialist and thus refers to ancestry, to humans’ beginnings and end in African cosmology. The coffin and the dead ancestors denote death, absence of life and combat. The last journey deep down the river or the sea is inactivity and consequently acceptance of the law of life, the last limit that nature sets to man. In the above assertions, both rivers and trees have more spiritual connections and barely stand for freedom as is the case in the three poems selected.

Trees and Rivers as Quest for Freedom in “Song of the Son,” “Heritage” and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

As a response to appalling living conditions and as affirmation of the Black’s “dignity and humanity in the face of poverty and racism,” the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance sought to assert freedom from social constraints and prejudices imposed on Blacks. This assertion of freedom and deviation from old literary and cultural conventions is expressed by James Weldon Johnson in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, the 1922 anthology of verse that he edited. He campaigned for black poetry with a “form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos” of African Americans. Exploiting the images and a poetic language particular to the African American implies, in a way, moving away from established norms and seeking a poetic idiom and voice that will express the new black artist’s sensibility and condition.

In his 1926 essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes recaptures this assertion of freedom thus:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Gates et al., 2004, 1314)

Hughes’s statement is affirmation of the black artist’s pride in his/her color and culture that have been rejected not only by racist Whites, but also by Blacks who have blindly assimilated white culture and its stereotypical representation of the black color. The mountain and the tom-tom that cries and laughs become expression of freedom from racial and social prejudices, as evidenced by “we stand on top of the mountain free, within ourselves.” As a result, the metaphorical use of trees and rivers as assertion of freedom echoes in the three poems selected.

“Song of the Son”

First published in *Crisis* on 23 June 1922, and in *Cane* in 1923, “Song of the Son” is a memory of slavery and affirmation of freedom. The persona recalls the slaves’ trauma evident in the first stanza:

Pour O pour that parting soul in song,
O pour it in the sawdust glow of night,
Into the velvet pine-smoke air to-night,
And let the valley carry it along.
And let the valley carry it along. (Turner, 1988, 14)

“The parting soul” is both death and resurrection, as the song perpetuates the soul’s existence. The repetition of the verb “pour” connotes a flow meant to relieve from sorrow that nature and the night take away from the sufferer. In “And let the valley carry it along,” the valley becomes the perpetuator of the song as it carries it along and thus forecasts the son’s return to his land in the subsequent stanza.

O land and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,
 So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
 Now just before an epoch’s sun declines
 Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,
 Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

In the poem, the red soil and the sweet-gum tree hint at the slaves’ toil and the produce that ensued. The gum and the pine trees are also relics of the past that the poet wants to retrieve, in “Now just before an epoch’s sun declines.” The “epoch’s sun” that declines is the Southern African American tradition of folk songs that enabled the slaves to withstand the woes of slavery and thus assert their freedom from the psychological trauma inflicted on them by forced labor. The repetition of the line “Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,” is the poet’s relief and joy because he has rescued the dying tradition.

As Bernard W. Bell explains,

while in Georgia, Toomer was deeply moved by the beauty of the folk songs he heard and saddened by the belief that the industrialization of the South would soon make them relics of the past. Adapting the conventions of the pastoral to his subject, he therefore employs folk songs as symbols of the folk spirit of Black Americans, and, by extension, of the eternal soul of man. (Turner, 1988, 223-224)

In his poem, Toomer associates trees with folk songs to express the enduring spirit of the African American when s/he is confronted with the realities of the past and the present. Toomer’s trip to Georgia in 1921, as Bell and Lucinda H. MacKethan point out, brought him in contact with African American peasants. This contact changed his perception of the Negro. Quoting Mabel Dillard, MacKethan remarks that “seeing the Negro, ‘not as a pseudo-urbanized and vulgarized, a semi-Americanized product, but the Negro peasant, strong with the tang of fields and the soil,’ had the effect on him of giving ‘birth to a whole new life’” (Turner, 1988, 230). This emergence of a new life derives from what Bell considers “adapting the conventions of the pastoral to his subject.”

Stanzas four and five blend the pastoral, slavery and the poet’s quest for freedom from the past and the present:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,
 Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,

1 Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
 2 One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes
 3
 4 An everlasting song, a singing tree,
 5 Caroling softly souls of slavery,
 6 What they were, and what they are to me,
 7 Caroling softly souls of slavery. (Turner, 1988, 14)

8
 9 The Negroes are compared to ripened plums that are squeezed and thus
 10 lack energy like the old bare tree that stands for the past that is gradually dying
 11 away. The bare tree apparently symbolizes death and severance from the roots.
 12 Yet the persona uses the one plum left on the tree as a tool of combat, a means
 13 to achieve freedom. The old tree that has borne the plum has given birth to the
 14 singing tree, a pictogram of joy and victory. The song of the son, which is the
 15 singing tree, departs from the past that has dehumanized the black slave to
 16 focus on the present in order to reinstate the slave's humanity. The everlasting
 17 song, the singing tree, appeases the souls of the slaves and revives their
 18 fighting spirit and quest for freedom.

19 Contrary to Mbiti, Toomer uses the tree not as a symbol of spirituality, but
 20 as both acknowledgement of and detachment from the past tainted by slavery,
 21 to assert his freedom from his African ancestry and his mainstream racist
 22 American culture. The singing tree is thus the birth of a new transnational/
 23 transcontinental identity, that of the African American. The same quest for
 24 freedom is visible in Cullen's "Heritage."

25 26 *"Heritage"*

27
 28 "Heritage," first published in *The Survey* on March 1, 1925, presents a
 29 poet who is caught between the African and American cultures, between the
 30 past and the present, and who struggles to set himself free from both cultures
 31 that have fashioned his being. David K. Kirby, who compares Cullen's poem to
 32 Eliot's *Waste Land*, as both poems highlight the "dilemma of the modern
 33 individual, aware of his rich heritage, yet stranded in a sterile, conformist
 34 culture," has titled the first stanza of the poem "The Question" (Par. 1). This
 35 stanza poses the recurring question of the poem: "What is Africa to me?"

36
 37 What is Africa to me:
 38 Copper sun or scarlet sea,
 39 Jungle star or jungle track,
 40 Strong bronzed men, or regal black
 41 Women from whose loins I sprang
 42 When the birds of Eden sang?
 43 One tree centuries removed
 44 From the scenes his fathers loved,
 45 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 46 What is Africa to me? (Baym et al., 1998, 1753)

One can infer from the question “What is Africa to me?” that the African continent is unknown to the poet and only the “cinnamon tree” and “the scarlet sea,” its cosmic elements, make it real to him. The lines “Jungle star or jungle track,/ Strong bronzed men, or regal black,/ Women from whose loins I sprang/ and One tree centuries removed” refer to the poet’s African roots. The past is retrieved by the use of “centuries” and the archetypal image of the jungle that most often qualifies Africa as the Dark Continent void of civilization.

This stereotypical image of darkness, associated with Africa, is reinforced in the second stanza by the expressions “wild barbaric birds,” “goaded massive jungle herds,” “defiant grass.” Despite this stereotype, the poet pledges allegiance to his African heritage as he remarks “So I lie, who all day long”/ “Want no sound except the song”/ “Sung by wild barbaric birds.” The expression “So I lie” is replicated in

So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood damned within. (ibid)

Reference to the skin color unravels the persona’s mixed feelings: distress and joy, a consequence of his dark skin and blood, signs of his African heritage. This thus gives rise to the comparison in stanza three.

The subsequent stanza 3 compares Africa to a “book one thumbs listlessly.” A forgotten continent, whose bats, cats, and river reeds are not remembered. Once more, the persona recalls African flora and fauna which he opposes to his American environment:

Here no leprous flowers rear
Fierce corollas in the air;
Here no bodies sleek and wet,
Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
Tread the savage measures of
Jungle boys and girls in love.
What is last year’s snow to me,
Last year’s anything? The tree
Budding yearly must forget
How its past arose or set. (Baym et al., 1998, 1754)

The present environment is different from that of his origins. The bodies that are not sleek and wet are contrasted with those of the slaves on which rain and sweat mingle because of the slaves’ exposure to hard labor. The new environment is oriented towards the present and the questions “What is last year’s snow to me,/ Last year’s anything?” bring the persona nearer the present and the past becomes meaningless and without much influence on his present life.

The archetypal pattern of the tree thus liaises between the past and the present: “The tree./ Budding yearly must forget/ How its past arose or set.” The

budding tree is the present and its prospects for the future. Liaising between the past and the present is characteristic of Cullen's ability to reconcile his different selves in a bid to resolve the tensions apparent in the opening lines of his poem. To Lomax, these lines "introduce Cullen's conflict in terms of tensions between past and present, Africa and America" (Par. 4). As Lomax points out, "Neither black nor white, Cullen saw himself somewhere in between, an undefined individual consciousness for whom 'colored' became as good a label as any" (Par. 3). The tree that symbolizes Cullen's in-betweenness in "Heritage" partakes in his quest for roots and freedom.

Likewise, Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" epitomizes the poet's search for freedom. Referring to McMillin's *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature*, Eunice Ngongkum, in her book *Anglophone Cameroon Poetry in the Environmental Matrix* writes: "McMillin notes that the different ways in which humans experience rivers, namely, by, up, down, across, and up and down the river, provide interesting perspectives from which to read river literature" (Ngongkum 2017, 99). Hughes utilizes the up and down movement in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is Hughes's first poem published in *The Crisis* in June 1921 and dedicated to W.E. B. Dubois. As Arnold Rampersad, his biographer, points out in *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Hughes wrote the poem on a train when he was travelling at sunset from Illinois across the Mississippi and into the Missouri. The poet speaks of four rivers that have impacted on his life: the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile and the Mississippi as seen in the following stanzas:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (Baym et al., 1998, 1731- 1732)

The persona's soul is as deep as the rivers because he has lived long and witnessed events, and specifically historical events. His life has been a series of

1 painful experiences. The Negro knows better than anyone the history of his life
 2 as he has lived it. He has travelled from Asia to Africa and America through
 3 four rivers that stand for three continents. His reference to the rivers presents
 4 the way he retraces civilization back to the source in East Africa. R. Baxter
 5 Miller describes the movements of these rivers thus: The Euphrates River
 6 flows from eastern Turkey southeast and southwest into the Tigris, a sign of the
 7 rise and fall of the Roman Empire. The Congo River serves as a boundary
 8 between northern and southern Africa (white and black Africa) and flows back
 9 into the Atlantic Ocean. The Nile flows northward from Uganda into the
 10 Mediterranean Sea, and the Mississippi River flows southeast from north
 11 central Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. Miller thus reiterates McMillin's up-
 12 down, north-south and east-west movements that denote a global setting that
 13 enables freedom of movement from one continent to another.

14 The Euphrates River, the cradle of ancient Babylonian civilization, makes
 15 one think of old times. It hints at antiquity and so doing, symbolizes old age
 16 and human experience. The Congo River is a site that provides peace and
 17 comfort to the Negro; the hut built by the riverbank represents settlement in the
 18 mother continent. The river lulls the persona to sleep. The Nile, a symbol of the
 19 Egyptian civilization, emphasizes the idea of antiquity and the Negro's African
 20 lineage, while the pyramids ignite his dreams of grandeur that sends him back
 21 to the glorious Africa's past. Yet Hughes, far from idealizing the Congo,
 22 depicts it as a stumbling block to his quest for freedom, because neither the
 23 peaceful site of the Congo nor the heights of the pyramids have a direct effect
 24 on his present life that is spent in the American continent. In the U.S., the
 25 Mississippi River thus becomes representative of the present and its connection
 26 to slavery and Abe Lincoln. Rampersad compares the "muddy river" to the
 27 poet's race, the primal source out of which he is born anew and "the muddy
 28 bosom" of this race makes him feel secure. The persona moves from the
 29 Congo, which lulls, and which, far from being an asset to the persona's
 30 freedom, may be a handicap to revolutionary change. Here, it is not symbolic
 31 of death and life, as presented by Mbiti, but rather a symbol of lassitude. The
 32 Nile and the Euphrates epitomize the past that the revolutionary poet must
 33 forego to face the present reality. And this reality is represented by the
 34 Mississippi River, the site related to the persona's fight for and achievement of
 35 freedom.

Conclusion

From my analysis of trees and rivers, one may observe that the selected revolutionary poems of the Harlem Renaissance underpin neither Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa Movement" nor the blind assimilation of the host white culture promoted by some bourgeois African Americans. The poets' reinterpretation of the African myths leads to the creation of a third hybrid cultural space where new transnational/ transcontinental identities are molded. The African American epitomizes these new transcontinental identities. Blending the original African myths and archetypes and those of their European American host culture, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance selected adulterate African and American cosmologies to declare their independence from the backward traditions of their homeland and racism of their host land. They thus assert their identity as African Americans. As a result, when Countee Cullen speaks of heritage, he does not refer to his African heritage but to his African American heritage, a poetic heritage got from ancestors such as Phyllis Wheatley. The singing tree in Toomer's "Song of the Son" thus heralds a new morning, an assertion that is a credo in the three poems.

Notes

- 1 The French version of Bontemps's book used in this article is the translation of *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972), published in New York by Dodd, Mead & Company.
- 2 This translation is mine. See the original statement in French below:
 L'arbre est le double de l'homme, de la force vitale sacrée qu'il doit savoir conduire afin de maîtriser les forces de dissolution présentes dans les eaux. C'est dans son cercueil de bois que l'homme s'identifie une ultime fois avec l'arbre avant de rejoindre les ancêtres défunts dans leur demeure aquatique [...] au fond de l'eau.

References

- Baym, N., et al. eds. 1999. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. Vol. 2. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Bell, B. W. 1974. "Portrait of the Artist as High Priest of Soul: Jean Toomer's *Cane*." *Black World* (Sept. 1974): 13-16.
- Bontemps, A. 1975. "Le réveil: souvenirs." In Arna Bontemps, ed., *La Renaissance de Harlem: écrivains noirs des années 20*, 9-43. Montrouge : Nouveaux Horizons.
- Brière, E. 1993. *Le roman camerounais et ses discours*. Barbès- Ivry: Editions Nouvelles du Sud.
- Canaday, N.Jr. 1975. "Les grands thèmes de la poésie de Countee Cullen." In Arna Bontemps, ed., *La Renaissance de Harlem: écrivains noirs des années 20*, 149-178. Montrouge: Nouveaux Horizons.

- 1 Cirlot, J.E. 1962. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Trans. Jack Sage. New York:
2 Philosophical Library.
- 3 Cullen, C. "Heritage." 1925. In Nina Baym et al. eds., 1998. *The Norton Anthology*
4 *of American Literature*. 5th ed. Vol. 2, 1753-1754, New York & London: W.W.
5 Norton & Company.
- 6 DuPlessis, R. B. 2001. *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American*
7 *Poetry, 1908-1934*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 15 Apr. 2003. [http:](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
8 [//www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
- 9 Gates, L., H. Jr. and McKay N. Y. 2004. *The Norton Anthology of African American*
10 *Literature*. 2nd ed. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 11 Guerin, W. L., et al. 1999. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 4th ed.
12 New York: Oxford University Press.
- 13 Harper, S. 2018. "Greenery as a Symbol of Immigrant Hardship and Vulnerability in
14 Gish Jen's TYPICAL AMERICAN." *The Explicator*, 76:1, 27-29, DOI: 10.1080/
15 00144940.2018.1430675
- 16 Hughes, L. 1922. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In Gates, L., H. Jr.
17 and McKay N.Y. eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd
18 ed., 1311-1314, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 19 ———. 1921. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." In Baym et al. eds., 1998. *The Norton*
20 *Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. Vol. 2, 1731-1732, New York &
21 London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 22 Hutchinson, G. 1995. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge:
23 Harvard University Press.
- 24 Jemie, O. 1976. *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York:
25 Columbia University Press.
- 26 Johnson, J. W. 1922. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. New York: Harcourt.
- 27 Kanu, A. I. 2013. "The Dimensions of African Cosmology." *Filosofia Theoretica:*
28 *Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*. Vol.2, No. 2 (July-Dec.
29 2013): 533-555.
- 30 Kirby, D. K. 1971. "Countee Cullen's 'Heritage': A Black Waste Land." *South*
31 *Atlantic Bulletin* 36.4.15 Oct.2016. [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
32 [_f/cullen/heritage.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
- 33 Leeming, D. and Page, J. 1999. *Myths, Legends, & Folktales of America*. New York:
34 Oxford University Press.
- 35 Lomax, M. L. 2000. "'The Singing Man Who Must be Reckoned With': Private
36 Desire and Public Responsibility in the Poetry of Countee Cullen." *African*
37 *American Review*. Vol. 34 Issue 4, (winter 2000): 661. 16 Oct.2016. [http://www.](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
38 [english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
- 39 Mackethan, L. H. 1988. "Jean Toomer's Cane: A pastoral Problem." In Turner D. T.
40 ed. *Cane: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, 229- 237, New York &
41 London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 42 Mavromataki, M. 1995. *Athens between Legend and History: A Tour of the*
43 *Monuments & Museums of the City and Its Surroundings*. Athens: Haitalis
44 Publishing Co.
- 45 Mbiti, J. S. 1989. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Edinburg: Heinemann.
- 46 McMillin, T.S. 2011. *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American*
47 *Literature*. Iowa: The University of Iowa Press.
- 48 Miller, B. R. 2006. "The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes." *Literature in*
49 *English, North America*. 44. Aug. 2019. [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_eng](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_english_language_and_literature_north_america/44)
50 [lish_language_and_literature_north_america/44](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_english_language_and_literature_north_america/44)
- 51 Ngongkum, E. 2017. *Anglophone Cameroon Poetry in the Environmental Matrix*.
52 Bern: Peter Lang.

- 1 Rampersad, A. 1988. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 1, New York: Oxford
- 2 University Press. 15 Apr. 2003. [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hug](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/rivers.htm)
- 3 [hes/rivers.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/rivers.htm)
- 4 Sheasby, R. E. 1995. "Dual Reality: Echoes of Blake's 'Tiger' and Cullen's 'Heritage.'" *College Language Association Journal* 39.2. (Dec. 1995) 15 Oct.2016. [http://](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm)
- 5 www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/cullen/heritage.htm
- 6 Toomer, J. 1975. "Song of the Son." In Turner D. T. ed., *Cane*, 14. New York &
- 7 London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 8 Turner, D. T. ed. 1988. *Cane: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*. New
- 9 York & London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 10 Wagner, J. 1973. *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to*
- 11 *Langston Hughes*. Trans. Kenneth Douglas. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- 12 Wheelwright, P. 1962. *Metaphor and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 13
- 14