IMAGES OF AFRICA IN BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE

IMAGES OF AFRICA
IN BLACK
AMERICAN LITERATURE

MARION BERGHAHN

For my mother
with affection and gratitude

© Marion Berghahn 1977

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1977

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without permission

First published 1977 by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
London and Basingstoke
Associated companies in New York
Dublin Melbourne Johannesburg and Madras

ISBN 978-1-349-03463-5

ISBN 978-1-349-03461-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-03461-1

*This book is sold subject
to the standard conditions
of the Net Book Agreement*

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
1 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND	1
A : THE 'WHITE' IMAGE OF AFRICA	
I Early encounters of the West with Africa	
(a) The Black-White Symbolism	
(b) Noah's Curse	
(c) The African as a creature of nature	
(i) The Noble Savage	
(ii) 'The 'Ape Man'	
II The 'white' image of Africa during the period of slavery	
(a) Evolutionism	
(b) Evolutionary theory as a justificatory ideology	
(i) 'Sambo'	
(ii) 'The Brute'	
III Africa in modern anthropology	
B : THE AFRICAN ELEMENT IN AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE	
I The role of Africa in the self-image of Afro-Americans	
(a) The repercussions of the rejection of the 'African' ego	
(b) The significance of group consciousness	
II Aspects of the process of Afro-American acculturation	
(a) Problems of Afro-American culture	
(b) The significance of Africanisms	
III Summary	
2 THE EARLY IMAGE OF AFRICA	33
I The first Afro-American poets and Africa	
(a) Jupiter Hammon	
(b) Phillis Wheatley	
(c) George Moses Horton	

vi *Contents*

II	The significance of Africa for the emigration movement of the nineteenth century	
	(a) Africa – the Strange Country	
	(b) Africa – the Land of Hope	
	(c) Africa – the Land of Promise	
III	On the threshold of the twentieth century – the genesis of the ‘New Negro’	
3	PAN-AFRICA AS A MYTH IN THE LITERARY WORK OF DUBOIS	66
	I Black and white in DuBois’s world of ideas	
	II The genesis of the ‘Pan-African’	
	III The message of Pan-Africa	
4	THE ‘HARLEM RENAISSANCE’	118
	I The Harlem Movement	
	(a) Alain Locke’s ‘Manifesto’ of the Harlem Renaissance	
	(b) The role of the white primitivists	
	(c) The black poets of the Harlem Renaissance and Africa	
	II Summary	
5	THE TRANSITIONAL PHASE – TIME OF SCEPTICISM	152
	I The background	
	II Richard Wright	
	III Ralph Ellison	
	IV James Baldwin	
	V Summary	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	189
	<i>Notes</i>	193
	<i>Select list of secondary sources</i>	224
	<i>Index</i>	229

Introduction

The 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of a lively artistic and cultural movement among blacks in the United States. The intensity and militancy of this movement came as a surprise to many people. It was above all the keen interest in Africa shown by many American blacks which a number of observers found puzzling and completely unexpected. What ties could Black Americans possibly have with Africa, where their forefathers had come from such a long time ago? Could there be, they asked, a greater psychological and cultural gap between an American minority group and their country of origin than between present-day Africans who were just entering the era of industrialisation and the Afro-Americans, who were evidently the children of the technologically most advanced industrial society? But the truth was that in the 1960s Afro-Americans did become fascinated by Africa: they studied its culture, history, arts and languages. Even their life-style became affected by their interest in things African: it influenced their eating habits, the way they dressed, their hairstyle and their art.¹

The identification with that continent became so close that Africa and not America was often regarded as the real home of the American blacks. There are many examples of this in the black literature of the 1960s, as for instance in Clarence Reed's 'Song from Wasteland': 'Africa, Africa / Wrapped in sorrow / Steeped in Pain / Mother of us all / I must home to the / Warming womb / From whence all sprang . . .';² or in Jon Eckel's poem, 'Home is where the Soul is': 'I have never seen Africa / that distant land of mine / but I hear her beauty / sometimes and her colours staring with me through this world / . . . Africa, Africa, / this land of mine / Africa, Africa, Africa / this land of men'.³ But it was not only Africa which appeared in a new light: the Afro-Americans' image of themselves underwent a considerable change. Indeed, the term 'image' became a key notion in the vocabulary of the 1960s and could frequently be found in black writings. 'We are discovering', said Carolyn Gerald, 'that the image we have of ourselves controls what we are capable of doing.' Hitherto, she continued, the whites had managed to project their image on to the rest of the world. This formed the basis of their claim to superiority. The black man, on the other hand, merely experienced his existence in terms of a 'negative mirror-image' of the white world-view.⁴ Or as

Touré put it: 'Reality's blonde / wig smothers the Afros of our souls.'⁵ The cultural nationalists regarded it as their most important task to liberate the blacks in America from the 'white' image of themselves. This image, which they had accepted when they had succumbed to Western values and norms in general, had taught them to despise themselves as blacks. And it was this 'slavery . . . in our own minds',⁶ the nationalists agreed, which had also prevented the growth of a positive group consciousness, seen as the most important prerequisite of effective political action to counteract discrimination and exploitation of the black minority in the United States.⁷ Almost naturally Africa became the decisive point of reference in the search for a new and positive image of the individual Afro-American and the group as a whole, as expressed by Dudley Randall and many other black poets: 'The age / requires this task; / create / a different image; / re-animate / the mask. / Shatter the icons of slavery and fear. / Replace / the leer / of the minstrel's burnt-cork face / with a proud, serene / and classic bronze of Benin.'⁸

However, this process of dissociating themselves from the traditional assimilationist sympathies held by the majority of blacks seemed to have been painful and difficult as numerous exhortations like these imply: 'Check your vision young Africans [Americans] or Perkins' 'Apology to [his] African Brother' – 'Forgive me! / I have not been a faithful brother. / Memories of my heritage / Have been darkened by cumulus sky. / My mind washed pure / To worship an albino God . . . / O, if I could only build a bridge! / Over the sea which has diluted our blood . . .'⁹ The most striking feature of that period, which led to the widely known slogan 'Black is Beautiful', equally seems to indicate that even the most ardent nationalists needed constant reassurance about their 'African' identity: 'Take tools, our strength to break chains / and locks of containment and oppression. / Look – open eyes, / see images. Black images – Beauty images, / cornbread souls and African dust. / Strike blows, death blows. / Be free. / We are beautiful, / Winners.'¹⁰

To be sure, identification with Africa was not always easy and many Afro-Americans expressed quite ambivalent feelings towards their newly chosen 'home'; but the 'celebration of the African soul' and the intensive preoccupation with Africa seem to indicate that this concern was not just fanciful and unrealistic, as critical commentators often asserted. However, in order to appreciate the significance of that movement, which was largely a reaction against earlier attitudes, one has to go beyond it and look at its roots. One has to try to understand the meaning of Africa for Afro-Americans, the role it has played in their lives and their consciousness in the past. A particularly good reference point for analysing this relationship is provided by Afro-American literature. It is through these personal documents of

blacks that one can gain some remarkable insights into the role which Africa assumed in their lives. This book attempts to discuss the manifold aspects of the African image in Afro-American literature and to trace its development from the period of slavery to the present. Yet these subjective views of black authors cannot reveal the whole and very complex significance Africa possesses in the cultural, social and psychological spheres of Afro-American life. It will therefore be necessary to resort to categories of analysis developed by anthropology, sociology and social psychology in order to understand the deeper causes behind the attitudes which Black American writers have, at various times, adopted towards Africa.

This raises also the question of the 'valuation' of the respective images of Africa, of whether the image corresponds to reality or how far it represents an idealised picture, or otherwise, of reality. Here again it will be necessary to draw upon the findings and positions of modern anthropology so that we may move on firmer ground. At the same time it should be emphasised that our discussion will be rather a condensed version of complex historical developments and ideas. Above all the 'evolution of evolutionism' and of anthropology was not as straightforward a process as might appear in some passages. On the contrary, there were repeated overlappings of divergent positions. However, since all we are interested in is to give a general framework in which the relevant intellectual ideas developed, it seems legitimate to provide no more than a broad outline of the main trends.

In order to give a coherent impression of the significance of the 'African background' in the wider sense of the word, we begin with a longer chapter in which various aspects of this 'background' are examined in terms of anthropology and sociology in so far as this appears essential for an understanding of Afro-American literature. For our subsequent analysis a chronological approach was adopted as the basic organising principle, when various authors and their writings are examined. In this way, this book attempts to analyse the continuities and changes in the image of Africa over a longer period.

Acknowledgements

This book is an abridged version of a PhD thesis presented at Freiburg University and while preparing it I received encouragement and advice from many people among whom I would like to mention in particular the late Janheinz Jahn, Klaus Peter Dressler and Paul Breman. I would also like to thank Professor Jack Goody of Cambridge University who gave me his time to discuss the socio-anthropological aspects of this book, and Donna Lustgarten as well as Barbara Weinberger who read various parts of the manuscript and made useful comments. Warm thanks are also due to Dr Webster Asiedu who throughout a long friendship made me aware of what it means to live in a white world with a black skin. But I owe the greatest debt to my husband who translated the original German version into English and who above all through his untiring interest and understanding was – and continues to be – a constant source of inspiration and encouragement.

I alone, however, bear responsibility for the views expressed in the book – and its shortcomings, some of which may be due to the fact that the German version is more detailed. The original also contains additional chapters on Garveyism and the developments of the 1960s and early 1970s. The manuscript was completed in 1974.