

Déjà vu: The Crisis of the Black Intellectual Again: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Cornel West and the Omission of the Pan-Africanist Tradition

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"The American Negro has now reached a point in his progress where he needs to take serious account of where he is and whither he is going. Yet this situation is in sight and it brings not as many assume an end to the so-called Negro problems, but a beginning of even more difficult problems of race and culture. Because what we must now ask ourselves is when we become equal American citizens what will be our aims and ideals and what will we have to do with selecting these aims and ideals. Are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we will have in this process no ideals of our own?...The deficiency in knowledge of Negro history and culture, however, will remain and this danger must be met or else American Negroes will disappear. Their history and culture will be lost. Their connection with the rising African world will be impossible."

The talented and poetic rap lyricist, hip-hop philosopher and music innovator Kendrick Lamar (image on the right below) seems to be more attuned to the iconic and symbolic power of Africa in the Black popular imagination than Black America's supposed intellectual elite. His 2016 Grammy performance was as historic as it was uncompromisingly African-centered, situating the name Compton a city that has come to personify the emergence of West Coast gangsta-rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s within a silhouette of the African continent. His message, undeniable and bold rang out like a trumpet summoning a community from the stupor of self-delusion and historical amnesia. His *Pimp A Butterfly* track "The Blacker The Berry" says it quite succinctly, "I'm African American, I am African."



Yet Lamar's emphatic pronouncement of African ancestry and identity among African Americans even if representational has eluded the discourse of Black intellectuals in our post 9/11, hyper-patriotic, anti-Black, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant era. The omission of the Pan-Africanist nationalist and African-centered trajectory within the Black intellectual tradition represents at this historical moment a glaring crisis in the panorama of African American social and political thought.

In the essay *Kendrick Lamar's Grammy Performance points to a Simple Truth #Black Lives Matter When Africa Matters* written by Dr. Faraji nearly two years ago he clarifies the meaning and purpose of Black freedom and liberation when he says "the struggle for the dignity of African humanity in the United States transcends the quest for racial equality—and is more precisely a battle for the assertion of African power, sovereignty and the right to be self-determining, self-defining and self-building in the world." The positioning of African diaspora communities including Black America and African nation states as

socially, politically and economically sovereign societies in full control of their land, resources, human capital and socio-cultural institutions is ultimately the true measuring stick for Black progress. In its most classical and fundamental sense Pan African nationalism is about the building and developing of African nations and states in both Africa and the diaspora and the failure of Black public intellectuals to articulate this stance and even evade it all together is the primary intellectual crisis of our time.

What is most disturbing about Cornel West's recent critique of Ta-Nehisi Coates in the *The Guardian* article, "Ta-Nehisi Coates is the neo-liberal face of the black freedom struggle" is the idea that the African American intellectual landscape can be reduced to what West calls the "neo- liberal face" and so-called "radical wing" of which he claims allegiance and membership to. The Black intellectual tradition is far broader and certainly more complex than the two polarities that West seems to suggest as he takes on the banner of radicalism. What does he mean by "radical wing" and what are the criteria for such intellectual affiliations in African American social thought? Does he mean what Reiland Rabaka refers to in his book *Africana critical theory : reconstructing the black radical tradition, from W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James to Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral* or is he referring to the Gramscian organic intellectualism that led him to adopt radical democratic socialist throughout most of his career? We would not dispute the radical positionality of either one of these schools of thought and neither would we question the radicalism of Black feminist thought, critical race theory, post-colonialism, intersectional analyses or the transgressive, pan-sexual restructuring of gender categories proposed by the radical strands within LGBTQ perspectives. Our point is the designation "radical" covers the full gamut of Black intellectual perspectives and therefore it is a gross oversimplification for West to juxtapose his version of the "radical wing" as the intellectual binary of Coates' neo-liberalism.

The irony is that throughout the 1980s and 1990s leading up to September 11, 2001 West was considered by his Pan-Africanist counterparts such as the luminary John Henrik Clarke as the lukewarm, neo-liberal Black scholar who was more loyal to his brand of Marxism and Christianity than the uncompromising stance of revolutionary Pan Africanism. This was no small critique coming from Clarke who was an intellectual adviser to Malcolm X, founding chair of Africana and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College and whose name was bestowed upon the John Henrik Clarke Africana Library at Cornell University.

Is it possible that it is Coates and not West who is the radical simply because the former has dared to broach the topic of reparations for African Americans—a position that has been noticeably absent from West's intellectual repertoire for over four decades. Toni Morrison referred to Coates as "the single best writer on the subject of race in the United States" in response to his book, *Between the World and Me* and definitely his latest work *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* represents a powerful analysis of the present state of racial discord and political backlash in American politics today. However Cornel West is not entirely wrong in his characterization of Coates as the "neo-liberal face" of the Black freedom struggle.

Although we differ from West in that it is not only Coates' overestimation of the tragic in Black life and his resignation to a world without hope that is antithetical to Black freedom, but also his paradoxical views on Africa and nationalist consciousness that ultimately give power to a politics of ambivalence. For Coates "Pan Africa" maybe the subtext of Black life, but it is the ethos of survival that is rooted in realism and claims prominence. That some African Americans are the descendants of African royalty is simply a mythic celebration that

supplants the real fact that Black people are the progeny of slaves. And since he has resolved through an unsophisticated analysis of what he calls “separatist nationalism” as useless and futile Black people basically have no way out beyond integration or the altruism of whites. For Coates African consciousness is merely about the nostalgia of ancestry and tradition which at the least can help Black folk cope with their despair, but at the end of the day it is not a strategy that can lead to significant progress or advancement.

Ironically it is Coates’ essay *The Case for Reparations* that potentially points to Africa in a way that acknowledges that African Americans are the descendants of enslaved Africans whose labor, bodies, wealth and resources were plundered by white supremacist exploitation. In fact, hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of the African ancestors of African Americans were illegally smuggled into the country by countless American freebooters who wantonly broke the 1808 United States act that prohibited the importation of sovereign African nationals into the country.

Although Coates familiarity with the 1808 Act is bane, he nevertheless makes the case for reparations clear by citing the story of Belinda Royall a freed African woman from what is now Ghana petitioning the commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1783 for reparations due to having “endured the Middle Passage and 50 years of enslavement” at the hands of her master Isaac Royall. The Massachusetts legislature awarded her 50 pounds and 12 shillings which was paid out of the estate of Isaac Royall. Her story maybe exceptional, but it was her memory of her African homeland and the knowledge that she had been deprived of freedom, a livelihood and access to the economic opportunities of her slaveholder’s society that prompted her to pursue both justice and monetary compensation. Coates’ discussion of reparations need not be fatalistic or pessimistic because it actually situates the quest for reparations for Black America in the context of the global reparations movement in both Caribbean and Africa. Coates compelling argument for reparations is in alignment with the ten point action plan of the Caribbean Reparation Commission (CARICOM) and the call for reparations by the Herero people of the southern African nation of Namibia directed at their former colonizer Germany.



[Marines](#) train with [M16A2](#) rifles in March 2003 at Camp Lemonnier (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

We argue that a Pan Africanist vision on the issue of reparations would present a greater

likelihood of achieving victory. Likewise a Pan Africanist lens on what Cornell West rightfully highlights as American complicity in capitalist, imperialist and militaristic jingoism around the world is made more concrete and relevant when we consider that the east African country Djibouti is home to Camp Lemonnier a military base that has been described by a Washington Post commentator as the “busiest predator drone base outside the Afghan war zone” and “the only installation of its kind in the Pentagon’s global network of bases.” Camp Lemonnier functions as the “headquarters” for US counterterrorism and drone assaults in east Africa and the Middle East. It is essentially an intensification of US militarization in Africa via AFRICOM and the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership which according to the official spiel is for the purpose of supporting African militaries in the combat against terrorism. The Sahelian region of Africa has become the new flashpoint for global terrorism. A greater motivation however is the objective of securing US oil interests in Chad and Cameroon and protecting French energy security derived from Uranium mines in Niger. It should be evident that any discussion regarding reparations for Black America or the western tripartite forces of capitalism, imperialism and militarism must include Africa. Coates does so by innuendo and West is completely silent, so it is very dangerous to view any two individuals or thinkers as the summation of the Black intellectual tradition.

As much as we are steeped in the Pan Africanist intellectual tradition it is not our goal here to serve as uncritical ideologues, but to ensure that the totality of the Black intellectual tradition is engaged, referenced and resourced as we seek to solve and ultimately neutralize the pressing challenges that Black humanity is faced with in both the United States and the global community. We recognize the contributions of West, Coates and the plethora of other scholars, intellectuals, activists and revolutionaries who embody the heterogeneity of Black thought both past and present. Yet we must be unyielding in our stance that the inattentiveness and unwillingness of Black intellectuals, scholars and activists to make Africa and the African Diaspora central to our configurations of the Black freedom struggle is not only intellectually irresponsible, but also a betrayal of one of the most influential and impactful streams within African American intellectual heritage and socio-political praxis.

In his attempt to counter *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*, Peniel Joseph in his magisterial historical biography on Stokely Carmichael aka Kwame Ture, *Stokely: A Life* describes the Trinidadian born Carmichael as the successor of both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Carmichael was an activist-revolutionary who had been a part of SNCC, the Black Panther Party and a founding architect of the All African People’s Revolutionary Party under the tutelage of Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure. He was grounded in civil rights organizing, Black Power direct action and revolutionary Pan Africanist politics. For Carmichael Pan Africanism was the logical progression of both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power and any Black ideology that did not point to Africa was deficient in its understanding of revolution and freedom. Yet Peniel Joseph disparages and mocks Carmichael’s Pan-Africanist philosophy as well as his decision to take up residence in Guinea under the political mentorship of Sekou Toure and his co-president Kwame Nkrumah. For Joseph, Carmichael was a community organizer who had become a “revolutionary ideologue.” By turning to Africa, Carmichael’s once-clear political vision had succumbed to his ‘ideological faith’ in Pan Africanism. According to Joseph, Carmichael’s greatest sin was that he had betrayed the civil rights movement by disowning his “former, more hopeful perspective about American democracy.” Accordingly Carmichael spent the last 30 years of his life living under a repressive African dictatorship with less political freedom than the country he had first proclaimed the mantra “Black Power.”

Joseph's domesticized, neo-liberal, Black American reading of Stokely Carmichael is certainly not an accurate depiction of Carmichael's motivation and neither does it grasp the significance of Nkrumah or Toure's strategic role in leading anti-colonial, revolutionary movements in Africa. Even with Toure and Nkrumah's contradictions and failures the outright dismissal of Carmichael's Pan Africanist years smacks more of an anti-African disposition among many Black intellectuals than a sincere interrogation of this particular socio-political philosophy. It is in fact an ideological position that privileges the quest for inclusion into American society as the ultimate goal of Black freedom. This position, even if correct cannot ignore the role of the Pan Africanist intellectual tradition in advancing Black social, political and economic progress in American society—and neither should it disregard the significance of Africa as home to the world's critical and strategic resources in the realms of energy, agriculture, mining, minerals, technology, real estate and the extractive sectors of oil and gas.



Kwame Nkrumah

The centrality of Africa has been a major aspect of the Black intellectual tradition for over 200 years. Notwithstanding the Pan Africanist intellectuals and activists of the 19th century like Martin Delaney, Edward Blyden, George Washington Williams and the AME Church bishop Henry McNeal Turner. This tradition propelled the international Black freedom struggle throughout the 20th century. Booker T. Washington entertained inquiries from Black South African leaders on how to replicate the Tuskegee model for higher education in their own country. Washington also commissioned a delegation from Tuskegee to explore cotton production in the then German colony of Togo. Marcus Garvey along with his wives Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey forged a Pan Africanist agenda that has left a permanent impact on the collective consciousness of Africans in both Africa and the African Diaspora. Unsurprisingly African nationalist leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah both attributed the success of their anti-colonial independence movements in Kenya and Ghana respectively to the Pan Africanist ideals of Marcus Garvey.

Revolutionary African American thinkers like Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. DuBois attended the first Pan African Conference called by the Trinidadian lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams in 1900. For 63 years DuBois was devoted to the cause of Pan Africanism through his participation in the aforementioned conference and organizing the Pan African congresses between 1919 and 1945—and his leadership in the Council of African Affairs alongside Paul Robeson, Mary McCloud Bethune, Adam Clayton Powell and Ralph Bunche among others during the 1940s and 1950s. He joined Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in the early 1960s to launch the *Encyclopedia Africana* and died a naturalized Ghanaian citizen in 1963. His life is

a testament to the vitality of Pan Africanism among African American intellectuals.



Du Bois, c. 1911 (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

DuBois was not the only African American who took an interest in Ghana. Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Wright, St. Clair Drake, Muhammad Ali, Maya Angelou and Julian Mayfield among others either lived as expatriates in Ghana or attended the independence celebration of 1957. Those who were at the 1957 independence celebrations also joined dozens of others who attended the 1958 All African Peoples Conference in Accra, Ghana. Du Bois' wife Shirley Graham Du Bois was equally committed to the global African freedom struggle as she is buried next to her husband at the W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture located in Accra, Ghana. Furthermore, we must also consider William Leo Hansberry, the historian and pioneer of African studies at Howard University who was knighted by Emperor Haile Selassie on account of his anti-colonial activism against the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936. Hansberry also mentored African students at Howard such as Nnamdi Azikiwe who later went on to become the first president of Nigeria.

Malcolm X "Our Black Shining Prince" was the quintessential Pan Africanist forging relationships with African heads of state like Julius Nyerere to pass a resolution in the 1964 OAU meeting in Cairo condemning American racism and discrimination directed at Africa Americans. Malcolm X also traveled to Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Algeria and Morocco meeting with anti-colonial leaders to present the case of the Black freedom struggle in the United States. Malcolm's Caribbean born mother, Louise Little, had come from several generations of committed Pan Africanist and was herself a Garveyite along with her husband Earl Little.

As we move forward in the year 2018, we must not forget that the Pan Africanist tradition has long been at the forefront of the African American quest for freedom and justice. And in an age of globalization and internationalism it is extremely imprudent to disregard and make invisible the African continent, a region that is not only the ancestral home of African Americans and other Blacks in the Caribbean and Latin Diaspora, but also an emerging economic superpower that will be home to significant share of the world's population by 2050. If this tradition is continually deflated and ignored by Black public intellectuals such as West and Coates, then W.E. B. Du Bois's 1960 prophecy would have come to pass. African Americans will have missed the rising tide of Africa and forfeited the African continent to the interests of the European Union, China, Japan, India and the American corporate elite who

engage Africa without the approval, leadership or involvement of Africa's descendants in the United States.

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