

AFROCENTRIPETALISM & AFROPERIPHERALISM

1

I once saw Molefi Kete Asante plain. It was downstairs at the Vancouver (of all places) Public Library. Two of my Afrocentrist friends were there. I don't remember the questions they asked him, but I remember the urgency in their voices. They needed Asante. I was trying to figure out if I did too.

The nature of that need? A corrective against the assault of a marginalization that smacks a person of African descent in the face over and over by the time they are a young adult, as I was then. Okay. So Africa is at the centre. Why not? The centre is relative, subjective, if we're talking about continents, and we are, though we probably really are not. But while we think we are, it's worth saying that the human race was born there. It developed culture there and then it spread. When you find this out, you're enraged about the white lies they call history, economics, philosophy, religion, the canon. You start again and you start from you.

And that's where the trouble creeps in. The matter of "you" and where "you" are. At the centre? Inside Asante's definitions? Headed "back"? Asante's homophobia, recently and unconvincingly recanted, exposes the problem of his Afrocentricity: "homosexuality and lesbianism

are deviations from Afrocentric thought because they often make the person evaluate his or her own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness.”¹ Asante retracts his initial position on the basis that he now understands that homosexuality is not a choice. But his assertion of the individual’s subjection to the nation is there—or the supra-nation, as it were. You can see how the project of centralizing breeds gates, keepers, fallacies of purity, and oppressive prejudices.

In contrast, the ethos of anarchism has always seemed to me like something tyrants and aspiring tyrants would scoff at as impossible, but which has an in-built resistance to cultural centralization.

2

The problem with defining yourself by the centre is that you are working backwards. That which is earlier is supposed to be better. Because it was before the erasure, its reinscription is sacrosanct. This is a handy cudgel for authoritarians. Look to the Duvaliers in Haiti for Afrocentrism as policy, where it served to quiet social criticism, where it was at first used to smash the Left, and later to smash democracy altogether. Let them eat Egyptology.

Fanon exorcised all this in “On National Culture,” espousing an anti-colonialism that is a pragmatic synthesis of old and new in the form of a “fighting phase” of the culture.² Returning to previous traditions is no panacea. The modernity of Fanon’s position leaves room for social change and challenges to old thinking—in other words, Fanon’s position makes space for innovations that Fanon could not himself yet imagine. Ideas are not good just because they’re African. They are good if they lead to liberation.

And liberation always needs the future.

3

But I’m sympathetic to the project of Afrocentrism because it is indeed a correction of an unfathomably violent displacement. The best part of it is the spirit of correction and re-examination, and the possible creation of a more factual retelling of history, a recovery of Africa’s important roles. That part of the project is necessary and just.

Is “centrism” the best suffix for that though? Can the spatial metaphor be renewed?

1.
Asante, Molefi Kete, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Trenton: Africa Research and Publications, 1989), 72.

2.
Fanon, Franz, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

If Africa is the centre, and we are in a centrifuge, then two physical phenomena associatively show up: centripetal force and centrifugal force. The former is a real dynamic, and the latter is a subjective but fictitious *sensation* of force. That feeling when you're a passenger in a car that negotiates a roundabout—that feeling you are being pulled outward—is centrifugal force, and it's an illusion. What is actually happening is that you are feeling the tension that holds you to the centre, the friction of your weight in the seat. *That* force is real: centripetal force.

And it's an interesting metaphor for one whose relationship to Africa is compromised by the histories of slavery, repression, diaspora, mixed-race, adoption, whatever: what if the feeling that you are being pulled away is an illusion, and what you are actually feeling is the depth of the tension that holds you in connection? What if that tension can often feel like a pulling away even while it is actually an artifact of your inexorable link to legacies of descent?

Would this metaphor be healing? You're not being pulled away. But the effort to stay put *feels* like just such an anxiety.

You can put part of that burden down.
Afrocentripetalism is holding your connection as you round the corner.

I feel it in the poetry of May Ayim, mixed-race in Germany:

apart
memories
cheerful her face on his forehead
painful german
on his lips

apart
forgotten
her lips his face
ache cheerfully
african words

3.
Ayim, May, *Blues in Black and White: A Collection of Essays, Poetry, and Conversations*, trans. Anne Adams (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), 42.

apart
before they
lost each other
the daughter
apart³

I feel it in the writing of Miali-Elise Coley-Sudlovenick, mixed-race in Canada: In her short film *Blackberries* (2021),⁴ the protagonist, Effie Andoh, is Inuit on her mother's side and Jamaican on her father's, like the author. The film centres on a visit to Nunavut where she goes berry picking with a cousin and begins to reconcile both parts of her heritage. Andoh notes that what are called "blackberries" there are called "crowberries" in BC, where she is from, and the way the same berries are coded by two different terms functions symbolically for Andoh herself. And it is interesting to note that Coley-Sudlovenick's choice of berry—from the *empetrum nigrum* shrub—is one of the most vastly dispersed fruits in the world, growing as far north as the Canadian Arctic and as far south as the Falkland Islands, carried from one extreme end of the globe to the other by birds in migration. The fruit, like the person, is here, with the knowledge that it is there too. Like the person, it spans hemispheres.

6

When as a young man of African descent I started to deliberately read books by black writers, I first obtained what was easiest to locate: African-American, Caribbean, and African writers, roughly in that order. Baldwin, Walcott, Achebe. I saw the ways the experiences there reflected me and didn't. So I deliberately looked for Black Canadian writers and found some: Dionne Brand, Dany Laferrière, George Elliott Clarke. Their responses to Canada were recognizable, but were also all written 4000+ kilometres east of my upbringing. When I became curious about black writing in BC, I realized a proper survey of it had never been done. So I did it. I published the anthology *Bluesprint* in 2001, gathering up samples of every black writer I could find who localized here, the subtitle being *Black British Columbian Literature and Orature*. All my literary projects have been motivated by a question, and the one that prompted that one was: how is black life and writing different here? I'm still working on the answer. But one result is that I've come to appreciate the question itself as holding one key: we are on the periphery of blackness. Africa is the centre. But Black American culture spreads more than other types of black culture because US cultural imperialism incidentally delivers it. As oppositional as Black American popular culture might often be to American imperialism, the fact is that representation of it does flow through Hollywood, the music industry, publishing, and nearly all variations of US "soft power."

4. Coley-Sudlovenick, Miali-Elise, playwright. *Blackberries*. dir. Alicia K. Harris, *CBC Gem* video, 12:35, 2021, <https://gem.cbc.ca/media/21-black-futures/s02e04>.

To much lesser degrees this is true of Caribbean and Black British culture, which are also black centres. It took a while for me to notice that while black life in Western Canada of course converses with these centres, it often *feels* in some ways closer to other peripheries. Reading work by Ayim and Coley-Sudlovenick has also led me to other peripheral authors of the black diaspora: Maxene Beneba Clarke (Australia), Johannes Anyuru (Sweden), Valena Hasu Houston (Japan). Though the countries they engage with are obviously different from Canada, their presence in a region no one would describe as a black centre is instructive, resonant, and curiously familiar.

7

So if the force you subjectively feel pulling you away is actually the force of tension keeping you connected—Afrocentripetalism—what describes the kinship of those whose black experiences are on the very edge of perception? I will say it is Afroperipheralism.

And I will suggest there is no need to create around it an ideology. It is not a return to a glorified past, nor is it the building of an alternative centre. It is an acknowledgment of a feeling. It is a method of validating a contradiction, a curious condition that suggests both absence and ubiquity at the same time. It is a way of celebrating the reality of decentralization. For this reason, it can't be said that Afroperipheral culture has common traits—in fact, it opens things up relentlessly. But what I think it offers, as a naming, is a self-awareness of how complex black systems of culture-making are. Out there on the edge, we relate to various dominant societies, autochthonous populations, fellow minorities, and each other. The centre is there, and the legacy holds. But we are here, and here is possible. Blackness can in this way be on every horizon at once.