Why not Africa? : Ideas about Black Culture between Norman Douglas and Friends

Petrine Archer-Straw

A version of this paper was first given at the conference *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of The Harlem Renaissance* in 1997. At that time, I talked about Nancy Cunard, editor, close friend and biographer of Norman Douglas. I explored her zeal for black culture and her research in the Caribbean for her book called *Negro*. My interest in the Caribbean stopped me examining fully why Cunard never travelled to Africa, despite her passion for that continent. So today, I ask "Why not Africa ?" because it is a concern that Cunard also raises in her Douglas biography *Grand Man*. Her failure to get Norman Douglas to journey with her, she considered "a mystery to this day".

In this lecture, I look at Nancy Cunard's relationship with Norman Douglas, and the milieu of 1920s Paris that fostered the craze for black culture that I call "Negrophilia". By looking at Cunard, her involvement with avant garde artists, and her later work on the anthology *Negro*, it is possible to show how ideas about black culture influenced the Parisian circle, of which Douglas was sometimes a part, perhaps so much so that in 1925 and 1931 he made his own trips to Africa. Using Cunard's anecdotal account of their failed plans to visit Africa, and a close examinaton of Douglas' eventual contribution to *Negro*, it may become clearer, why Africa proved such a mystery and so out of reach for both Cunard and Douglas.

Nancy Cunard

Nancy Cunard was certainly enthusiastic in her dedication of *Negro*, the anthology of black culture first published in 1934. On its title page she wrote: "Dedicated to Henry Crowder my first Negro friend." And in her call for contributions she again emphasised: "It is primarily for Colored people, and it is dedicated to one of them. I wish by their aid to make it as inclusive as possible."

Negro came about because of Cunard's "shameless" affair with Henry Crowder, her black lover who would also become a friend of Norman Douglas. The bulky 600 page collection of articles, gathered while Cunard and Crowder lived together, was inspired by the excitement of the Harlem Rennaisance, the negrophilia craze that swept Europe in the 1920s, and Cunard's desire to create a book that would help Crowder and other blacks understand their African ancestry. Cunard wanted it to be an important resource for understanding the conditions and sentiments of black people and the first publication to voice freely their perspectives and ideologies. There were contributions from whites of course, and Cunard promoted the publication as a collaboration between "The two races".

Norman Douglas was one of Nancy's white colleagues asked to contribute to *Negro*. They met in 1923 and later became friends. Nancy was 27, half Norman's age. He was something of a mentor and treated her like an ingénue, with the tolerant wisdom of one who has had more experience of the world. Norman had already established a reputation as a cultural commentator, a writer with an ascerbic wit and critical eye. Cunard, meanwhile was full of enthusiasm for life, politically and socially active. They shared a love of travel that went beyond tourism or voyeurism towards ethnography and anthropology. Both loathed the conventions of Europe and became willing exiles in other cultures.

1920s Paris is rewarding for researching the visual and racial paradigms that influenced their circle. The artistic climate was sensitive and experimental, mirrored in its fashions and what Cunard calls a permanent state of avant-gardism. It was to Paris in 1928 that Cunard relocated her Hours Press that catered to a diverse community of authors, publishing hand and typeset books such as George Moore's *Peronnik* and Norman Douglas' *One Day*. Tradition and modernity were the underlying themes of these titles and inherent in this was a critique of the suburban sensibility and an appreciation of other cultures. For Douglas, this was mediterranean, but for Cunard it was african.

By 1925, the initial influence of African art's primitivism reflected in artforms such as Picasso's *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche* or D. H. Lawrence's novel *The Serpent*, settled into a marketable commercial style. Art Deco, the design success of the Paris Exposition des Art Decoratif, transformed into what art historian Rosalind Krauss labels "Black Deco". White juxtaposed with

black became vogue. The negro model ranged from inanimate sculptures to living Africans; all celebrated by Europeans as entertaining remedies for the ailments of modern life.

In the 1920s, blacks began to question their status. Spurred by leaders like pan-africanist Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, W. E. DuBois and the Harlem intelligentsia, black people were developing a new sense of identity. Migration to cosmopolitan cities such as New York and Paris increased their visibility and provided a common ground where they interacted with whites. Both races were intrigued with their new bedfellows. The relationship was superficial however, reinforced with stereotypes in popular culture. Enter the New Negro with all the old traits of the savage and erotic hidden beneath street smart suiting.

Viewed from the distance of European avant garde circles, the African artifact and the new urban black community were equivalent. Admiration for blacks was linked with a general ignorance about racial distinctions, geographical details and a common desire for vitality and potency. Unlike Norman Douglas, few artists ventured south of Tunisia to Africa's sub-continent. Hence, black people were blurred and malleable sources of fantasy for whites. Notions of "Otherness" depended upon this safe psychological and geographical distance.

Blacks who found themselves in Paris were courted for their sense of style and vitality. Some were discharged soldiers avoiding the racial restrictions of North America. Many others were entertainers, such as Josephine Baker and the Revue Noir troop or Cunard's lover, Henry Crowder from the Alabamians. They found that white interest in the Charleston, Lindy Hop, or Black Bottom could earn them a significant income. So they stayed.

The avant garde that best accommodated and patronised the "New Negro's" interests was itself in conflict with mainstream values. Many expatriates, like Natalie Barney, Hilda Doolittle, Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), Gertrude Stein, and Cunard, in the milieu most familiar to Douglas, exercised their sexual persuasions, in a way that they could not have at home. Their same-sex and inter-racial relationships placed them outside the boundaries of Victorian mores upheld by the status quo. The list of artists who took tea at Natalie Barney's Friday evening soirees reads like a modernist roll call including Nancy Cunard, Sam Beckett, Collette, Janet Flanner, André Gide, Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein.

The trend setters who fraternised with blacks operated in a bohemian world that indulged their sexual appetites and ideas about difference. Their intellectual and primitive interests were informed by a wayward surrealism, later more respectably clothed in freudian psychology, ethnography and anthropology. This

strain of surrealism promoted a romanticised stereotyping of the black image as a primitive but noble savage linked with notions of rejuvenation for the white race. Even writers as critical as Douglas supported these ideas. For Douglas, the so called "Bush native" was "the pure and unadulterated African ..the real article.. and… better than a good many whites." This admiration for blacks was typical of negrophilia sentiment held by Paris' bohemian set.

Cunard epitomised the negrophile of the 1920s and was in the artistic vanguard who shared an enthusiasm for Africa. From 1923-26 her friendship with artists such as the poet Tristan Tzara, sculptor Brancusi, and the photographer Man Ray assured her familiarity with authentic African artifacts. It also meant that her introduction to Africa took a surrealist slant that was anti-colonial and transgressive. Cunard saw the link between dada and surrealisms anarchic protests and Norman Douglas' more measured critiques, later expressed in works such as *How about Europe*. In 1924, she took her current lover Tristan Tzara to stay with Douglas in Florence. She later wrote: "I should have liked to hear you on the score of Dada philosophy, for there were so many things in its attack on academic pomps that would have appealed to you".

By the time she returned to Florence in 1926, her love interest had shifted to the surrealist artist and poet Louis Aragon, who developed a warm respect and friendship with Douglas. But Cunard's passion for Africa was growing, even as her interest in Aragon seemed to be waning. That same year she wrote her journalist colleague Janet Flanner that she was leaving for Southampton, the shipping port "to look for African and Oceanic things - because that is the most recent and very large interest in my life, ivory gods, masks, fetishes".

Pictured here sporting bangles up to her elbows, mock leopard garb and eyes ringed with kohl, Cunard projects not otherness but difference. Like a "shorthand" for the "exotic" her accessories are intended to enhance and complement. Nevertheless, Cunard's taste for negro forms went beyond the mere sporting of fashion jewellery. By 1928 she had left Aragon for Henry Crowder and the affair that resulted in her disinheritance and estrangement from the Cunard family. The press maliciously reported casual relationships with other black men such as Paul Robeson that indicated a "craze" rather than commitment on her part. But her subsequent work on *Negro* reflected a genuine need to identify with and to support black people. When colleague Alfred Cruickshank questioned why she devoted herself to fighting for racial equality, she concluded in poetic form…

"…instinct, knowledge..and then,
maybe I was an African one time".

For a negrophile like Cunard, her black lover's racial purity was also important to reinforce her own identity as a radical. As biographer Anne Chisholm says about her attitude to Henry Crowder:

"He was patient in a mildly embarrassed way, with Nancy's often express wish that he had a blacker skin, or that he behave in a more primitive, exotic manner. "Be more African, be more African" Harold Acton remembers Nancy saying to Crowder one evening …"but, I ain't African, I'm American" Crowder replied mildly.

With the assistance of Crowder, Nancy initiated the *Negro* project in 1929 that was to be her consuming passion for the next five years. The publication was plagued with difficulties. Lack of funds, racial conflicts and suspicion from both black intelligentsia and white conservatives dogged its progress. Despite this, *Negro* pulled between two covers contributions from a wide black community. Prominent diaspora blacks such as W. E. DuBois, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, among others, all made significant contributions. Similarly, members of Cunard's intellectual and artistic circle such as René Crevel, Raymond Michelet, Samuel Beckett, another ex-lover Ezra Pound, and of course Norman Douglas wrote about black culture. Articles about the conditions of blacks in Africa, North and South America, Europe and the Caribbean jostled with reviews of music, poetry, the arts and black history.

Collecting material for *Negro*, Cunard made several research trips, including two to the USA and one to the Caribbean. Despite her professed focus on Africa, she did not visit there. Instead, she followed the fashionable cruise ship routes of Cunard's White Star Line and the banana boats of the United Fruit Company, that plied the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Why Cunard never visited Africa is the mystery that she raises in *Grand Man*. The closest she ever came to making this trip was with Norman Douglas, just as the idea for *Negro* was germinating. Cunard recounts their plans and their frustrations in sufficient detail for us to get a sense of why their adventure was eventually aborted.

Ideas about a trip to Africa were raised in a lull between Cunard's press printing jobs. Spurred by her nightime cafe crowd of musicians, writers and artists, Cunard considered a trip for herself and Crowder who had given up his club work, to join her at the Hours Press. Cunard also invited Douglas, who asked her to think carefully about where they would go in Africa. Much of the West Coast that was rich in the material culture Cunard admired was under British occupation and subject to a colour bar.

From Crowder's dedication to Douglas "The incomparable", it is clear that the two men had a fond relationship and Cunard felt they would make a "curious trio" travelling together. But Douglas was more reserved, cautioning Cunard that the idea of journeying with a black man would be taboo.

I

EQUATORIAL WAY

Poem by Nancy CUNARD

Music by Henry CROWDER

Mod^to

INTRO

Not yet sat-is ...... fied But I'll be sat-is ... fied

With the days slaved for hopes, Now I'm cut-tin all the ropes

Get-tin in my due of dough From o-fays that'll miss me

Music Copyrighted by Henry CROWDER *1930.*
Recorded on SONABEL Records by the Composer.

"I like Henry - and so do you, ha! But the ordinary run of British passengers, and what's more, of British colonial passengers and officials, don't understand these things."

Typically, Cunard had no qualms about challenging British authority or its customs. But with Douglas in tow, she set about considering other territories more sympathetic to his sensibilities. In this way, and with much deliberation, they dismissed The Gold Coast, Nigeria and French Dahomey (for fear of leaky boats), eventually opting for the safety of the German Woerman Line destined for Walfisch Bay in Portuguese South West Africa.

But, with the price, boat, and date of travel settled Cunard began to have second thoughts. Despite the promise of visiting the Kalahari desert and even the Congo, she was dismayed that their first port, Walfisch Bay, was infamous for the German dessimation of Bantu herdsmen just twenty years before, and that it was culturally barren, she wrote: "Not an ounce of old carved ivory, not an inch of work in bronze or wood". Originally conceived at night as a romantic sojourn in the land of African sculpture and Henry's ancestors, their trip to Africa came smack up against the reality of colonial exploitation and what Cunard called "The negative swing of the morning". Even with her pride and determination to go, Cunard seemed ill-prepared to deal with Douglas' good humoured but indifferent support for their adventure and the fact that neither of them had the will to move their plans forward. The matter was dropped.

The only person who did not seem surprised at this outcome was Henry Crowder, who perhaps accustomed to European fantasising about black people and Africa, took a bemused approach to their stalemate. Confronted with Cunard's disappointment he cracked up with laughter saying "Oh, can't you see, Norman never had the slightest intention of going?" He might have said the same about Cunard. Despite their enthusiasm, their thwarted plans were indicative of their reluctance to journey into what Joseph Conrad called the *heart of darkness*, the possibility of escape only to be confronted by the self and colonialism's nightmarish realities.

Cunard never did visit Africa, and even when she became absorbed in the *Negro* project she was forced to rely on the experiences of others to define the continent. Despite her tireless appeals for fresh and definitive articles, the material she collected is more personal than global, more chatty than discursive. It is in this vein that we must view Norman Douglas's contribution to *Negro*. Cunard reproduces it in its entirety.

Letter about Arusha, Douglas' account of his time in Kenya, is a fascinating mix of frank disclosure and private fantasy. Douglas begins by explaining why it is easier to sell the shirt off his back than to provide her with the type of account that she requests. Douglas knew his accounts of Africa would not measure up to reader's expectations and so he could not write informatively about his travels in Africa for Cunard or other publishers. Unlike his journeys through Europe, where he spoke several languages fluently and sometimes had a better sense of the culture and geography than many locals, Douglas' experiences of East Africa were limited by his expatriate hosts, the "English set" who maintained colonial rule from the safe distance of their verandahs. In his letter, he regrets not speaking Swahili and not breaking with conventions, writing: "I should have camped out, and got my guide to initiate me into the life of the native population. Then I should have learned something."

If this were the extent of Douglas' letter we might consider it an unremarkable but honest account of colonial norms. But it is the lengthy post script that provides the meat for our analysis of his negrophilia sentiments. As if to compensate for his shortcomings, Douglas adds two paragraphs of pure invention, documenting a mythical Bimbokulos tribe who hatch and eat baby pythons as a cure for fecundity. Next, he recalls living for nearly five years with the fictitious Wallawapuplus people, describing in frightening details their canabalistic rituals and contest prizes of pubescent girls or freshly slaughtered babies. The tone of the piece is serious, written in a documentary manner that might be taken for fact, were it not for his outrageous assumptions and tongue in cheek "Monty Python" humour.

Cunard described the letter as "Gay" with a salutory note of humour that remained fresh even twenty years after *Negro's* publication. And she reproduced it fully, perhaps recognising that its contrast between fact and fiction was central to the European's appraisal of Africa and in stark opposition to the earnest nature of the rest of *Negro's* texts. The ability to slide between reality and fantasy is at the core of ideas about black culture held by Douglas and his friends. It is this illision between two Africa's that rests at the heart of the European agenda for Africa in this period. It supported a more general negrophilia sentiment that "coloured" their relationship with black people.

Why not Africa?…because there was no need. The details of the journey, the price, a boat, the date, all were unnecessary when one could invent so easily the continent of one's dreams as a postscript to reality. Surely, this is why Cunard's concern that Douglas had played a peculiar kind of joke on her by not taking their travel plans more seriously, gained his confident response "its not a joke at all my dear, I'm perfectly ready to start tomorrow."