Multiple Consciousness: Laye Camara 'S The Dark Child and Richard Wright's Black Boy

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Abstract

This article re-examines Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*, a major African literary canon novel, against the tendency to consider it a non-confrontational novel regarding racism and colonization. From a multiple colonial historical background, this book's pretentious title, compared to the consciousness of its American counterpart (Richard Wright's *Black Boy*), fails to give satisfaction to important issues of the clashes between Africa and the West. The unique aspect of this article is that if reveals how the ostensible African black boy got stuck many a time in the quicksand of color.

Keywords: Camara . Color . Multiple consciousness . Black boy.

Introduction

"One can successfully write about the African experience without creating a conflict between the races. (…) I find it meaningless to create a fictional dramatization of racial tension or to talk (…) of racial discrimination in a restaurant."[1]

--Laye Camara

"The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all his manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary."[2]

--Richard Wright

A reader's life history can sometimes come to strongly mingle with stories he/she reads, especially when the materials are autobiographies. I want, therefore, to hold from my personal viewpoint that the act of reading an

1 "Camara Laye: Commitment to Timeless Value". Interview by J. Steven Rubin. *Africa Report*. (May 1972). Retrieved from http://www.webguinee.net/bibliotheque/camara-laye/commitment_timeless_values.html

2 Richard Wright. "Blueprint for Negro Writing". 1937. in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, by Winston Napier, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 49

autobiography is itself an autobiographical act. My reading of Camara's *The Dark Child* and Wright's *Black Boy* is illustrative of this.

The central idea of this paper stemmed far back from my childhood reading experience, and so did my controversial encounter with the issue of race and its implications in my understanding over the years. This paper intends to discuss the difficult boundaries in understanding race as addressed in *The Dark Child* and *Black Boy* with regard to the 'blackness' of the main protagonists of these two autobiographies.

Too often readers tend to minimize the importance of their life histories in favor of jumping into theoretical discourses. My point is that in processing texts, of whatever genre, which are associated with race, blackness, whiteness, and Otherness, a reader ought to consider in fine detail the origins of the prejudices, opinions, and historical events (for example German, American, and French colonialism in my own case) that enable him/her to make interpretations.

Perhaps with the advent of slavery, and certainly by the beginning of European colonialism, race has been a complex and shifting concept. Scholars versed in post-colonial theory and more recent developments in Diaspora studies and world literature have encountered and entered this terrain with a degree of vitality and intellectuality[3] that have re-charted the direction of literary studies over the last several decades. Notwithstanding the re-mappings, critical problems and gaps persist, in significant part, because of structural and institutional frames associated with the American and European provenance of the sources and resources. For example, in the United States, despite the 1890s advent of pan Africanism, stewarded by W.E.B. Du Bois, often called its "father" figure, the African-American intellectual canons have been internally focused. Figures like Frantz Fanon disrupted this, but by and large the canon was itself segregated from Africa and other minority canons within the United States.

One need not detail the deep and manifold implications here, for many scholars on all sides of the Atlantic know them well enough, but it is worth pointing out and iterating the obvious *omission*: caught in the clutches of this

3 Quite a bit of this scholarship has been, unfortunately, too esoteric, and thus not useful for change. One of the abiding complaints about post-colonial theory, which has re-directed it toward the perspective of the common people, is that it is too academic and European or American. This reality has been largely pointed out by Gayatri Spivak in "The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues", ed. Sarah Harasym, London, Routledge, 1990 and Matthew Libman in "Postcolonial Cultural Affiliation: Essentialism, Hybridity, and the NAGPRA", ed. M. Liebmann and U. Rizvi (2008). *Archaeology and the Postcolonial Critique.* New York, Altamira Press, pp. 73-90. The complaints have been highlighted by Rita Abrahamsen in her "African Studies and the Postcolonial Challenge". *African Affairs* (2003). 102, pp. 189-210 before she fully engaging in challenging the dismissal of the theory and its appropriateness in addressing African studies.

dynamic are small West African countries, those little known to the canon, whose place in the "black Atlantic" remains, for all intents and purposes, an invisible vacuum.

Illumining case studies from these invisible vacuums are useful, for the racial micro-politics of nations declared post-colonial—the continuing influence of colonial powers is too well known to dispute—simultaneously reveal fissures between the privileged location the African-American canon enjoys and make possible bridges to abrogate or ameliorate such divides. One particular example, known to me personally as a native and professionally as a scholar of literature, is the complex intersection of *erased* race, (post) colonialism, and Francophone African autobiography in Togo, a West African country. *The Dark Child*, the title of the autobiography, is the rich, contradictory site to begin this examination, for unlike Richard Wright's 1945 classic, which centered race in America, Laye Camara's *The Dark Child* (1953) erases France, and thus distorts race for its francophone African audience. The francophone African readership may be disserved by this erasure, but broad terms are incommensurate with the intense micro-politics of Togo past and present. As I demonstrate in this essay, the invisible vacuum into which Togo lies in *terra obscura* is amplified by the post-colonial legacies of Germany and France, and a little-known history of the Tuskegee Institute's 1901 expedition, that make race in Togo resonant with the paradox of culture: it is both everything Togolese, German, French, and African American, and yet, thanks to Camara's *Black Boy*, much ado about nothing.

Although the book's title was racialized by Plon[4], the French publisher, many readers seem to agree with the writer's refusal to involve in confrontational issues against the colonizer. Camara seemed not to care about the heights and affects of racism and colonialism, and many readers could think that only the book's title was affected by color. As a matter of fact, *The Dark Child* has generally and in aberrant ways been construed as being centered on African culture and civilization, thus both covering and effacing cultural legacies of colonialism. Existing scholarship about this work mostly followed in Camara's steps of using Western eyes to blur race. In a 2003 essay, Afagla who interestingly covered already a comparative analysis of both Camara and Wright's classical autobiographies held that Camara's "cultural integrity is judged to be total and he does not feel separated from his people by an inner distance, but by a geographical space" (8), and that "French colonialism had not been totally negative because he had no identity problem as a result of the colonial encounter" (ibid), thus voicing the author's ostensible attachment to his traditional Africa although he was living and

4 The book's initial title had been *L'Enfant de Guinee,* which will literally be *The Guinean Child* in English.

writing on a distant land, in colonial France. Afagla and other scholars could highlight Camara's blatant separation from his people, his being strongly influence by color. They rather succeeded in consolidating Camara's faking ties to the African continent.

Camara's quotation which opens this essay is a 1972 interview with Steve Rubin in which the author, voicing his pretentious choice to demarcate his writing and themes from racial issues, described his perspective in self-assured tones. Alluding to how segregation/racism occurring in American public facilities is unabashedly and bluntly denounced by some African American writers, he thought it was futile to do so, when speaking about his African experience. This quotation which also expresses Camara's authorizing his manifesto as a writer opens a breach for examining the way in which he blatantly fails to avoid friction between races, except that he rather keeps the racial fire burning.

I want to give a brief account of Togo, a country with multiple colonialzimmer histories, which expectedly yields, in readers' mind, to a complex and multiple consciousness in terms of interpreting literature, race, double-consciousness, and postcolonial issues, as it does importantly add to them.

I. Background to the Need of Multiple Consciousness

Like other African countries, Togo forcibly experienced the brutalities resulting from Europe's late nineteenth-century invasion of the continent. Being in a 'no-man's land' between two then existing kingdoms (Ashanti to the west and Dahomey to the east), the people of what would be later known as Togoland mainly lived on agriculture, hunting (rich, vast plains mainly in the south), and fishing (the Atlantic Ocean, lakes, and rivers).

The coastal populations first experienced connection with German missionaries in 1847. Later on, German traders followed suit. Some of the fetishes they worshiped "forbade the presence of Europeans in some areas" and were employed "as an organized form of resistance to European rule" (Zimmermann, 2008: 130).

European powers recognized Togoland as a German colony in 1885 after Gustav Nachtigal, a German imperial commissioner had signed a first protectorate agreement with Mlapa III, the chief of Togoville, a coastal town in 1884, in Germany's attempt to claim colonial territory like Britain and France. Many achievements, ranging from churches and schools to roads and railroads soon mapped Togoland and showered the German colonizer with great pride.

Local industries existed in Togo and already assured some economic independence to local people, mainly weaving and pottery. Togolese weavers claimed paternity over the well-known *Kente* cloth since the eighteenth

century before they were attacked and subjugated by the Ashanti[5]. Interestingly, cotton was well known and manipulated into handicraft by the natives long before the arrival of Europeans. Pottery industry flourished mainly in the region of Tove and assured some economic independence to women especially. Tragically, the pottery industries of Tove were attacked by German colonizers, breaking apart the pots and burning down houses, during an expedition led by Gruner and Lieutenant von Carnap in 1894 and 95[6]. The economic freedom was a threat to colonial Germany whose major concern was to establish German supremacy in the region. As a matter of fact, fear of Germany was 'successfully' spread after that dreadful attack, even to neighboring Gold Coast. Less, then no, consideration was given to local industries, the means of which were thought to be irrational, thus savage, by colonizers, henceforth the necessity to civilize them, necessity to relegate local weaving to the backstage. The invitation of the Tuskegee Institute scholars to Togo by the German government worked to both reinforce this view about the people of Togo and suppress in them their endeavors for economic independence.

The arrival of Tuskegee members late December 1900 marked a new step in reinforcing the colonial stronghold in Togo. Alabama's presence in Togo was controversial because it was an all-black expedition and the natives would have felt closer to them but their first lodgings in Tove were the huts taken by force from natives by the German army. Most surprisingly, although sharing the same race, Tuskegee members had a totally debasing view about the Togolese.

As a matter of fact, just five months after their arrival in Togo, John Robinson succeeded in gathering elements about the Togolese, sufficient for him to side with European views about black people. That unforgettable presence which served to assist local population with agriculture was also conspicuous by abusing more the natives in Togo. The description of the Togolese in a report that he sent to their master Booker T. Washington back in the U.S. was shocking. Describing the Togolese along with animals by viewing them through the colonial telescope, Robinson proudly wrote: "The picture here in, represent[s] the force of cows, horses and boys trained to help with the tecnical (sic) part of the work. I speak of them together for I am quite sure that it was more difficult to train the boys than to train the horses" (128). It was not difficult for Robinson to give a view of people and animals together.

5 Most complete story about this can be found in *Encyclopedia of African History Volume 1*. Kevin Shillington, ed. (2005), New York, Taylor and Francis Group.

6 Andrew Zimmermann covered this story and more in his groundbreaking work: *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South (America in the World).* Princeton, N.J, Princeton University Press, 2012. Reprint

Associating human beings to animals was not new in that context and just reinforced how black people were treated during Slavery with the association of men to horses, women to cows, and children to pigs. This description erases the humanity of the people he had to train. Moreover, Robinson who was thinking of the Togolese as living in an irrational world on irrational means—irrationality belonging to animals—reduced the men he was training to boys, a way of infantilizing them, which emphasized his own position as a master and 'the boys' as slaves. It is more demeaning when he thought his assigned horses were easier to teach/tame than the Togolese people.

That colonial view of Africans is no longer to be discussed here. The last paragraphs of Robinson's report highlighted too his internalization of racist views of Africans. A portion of this runs: "We are getting on well as can be expected being so far from civilization. There are ten only civilized persons within a radius of 50 miles or more (…) (129)[7]. The benightedness of the African continent as projected in the reporter's mind made him believe he was "far" from America, the City upon the hill, the civilization *par excellence*, and the way they felt in Togo was no surprise to the expedition, since it was unquestionably expected. When mentioning 'civilized persons' in this famous report, Robinson was simply referring to the 107 Germans present on the Togolese soil before the arrival of 'prestigious' Tuskegee there. All the non-Germans—non-whites—were logically uncivilized, in Robinson's terms. This sadly and tragically biased view of Africans added to the irrecoverable trauma Germans already caused in the region raises questions about Tuskegee and its presumably humanitarian projects for Africa, its role as henchman beside European colonial strategies.

However, assuredly and more expectedly, the expedition helped set up a cotton school in the south that "gave three years of training in cotton growing to male students from all over the colony" (Zimmermann, 16). Cotton was one of the cherished raw materials at the turn of the century, and local populations, while growing cotton did not enrich the traditional weaving industries they had but served to enrich German textile industries, boosting Germany's economy. The income was not used to assist the population in terms of economic independence. Moreover, Germany's vow to make Togo a *Musterkolonie* could not quench off its thirst for demeaning brutalities against local populations. At least, neighboring colonizers viewed German policy in Togo in terms of "brutality, lack of educational opportunities, and forced labor." (Zimmermann, 17). Basically, native populations were all the time "subject to rigid colonial justice that made *much* use of corporeal punishment (emphasis mine)" (Stearns, 2008: 134). The colonial justice mentioned here

7 Barbara Kraft, Louis Harlan, and Raymond Smock, eds. *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 6: 1901-2. University of Illinois Press, 1977

dealt more harshly with people who refused to submit to the colonizer's order. This form of justice replaced the existing traditional administration before the arrival of German colonizers. Brutal treatments occurred mainly during institutionalized forced labor, which peaked with railroad constructions.

Surprisingly later, the Togolese eye-witnessed Germany's defeat during World War I, which largely contributed to bringing down the ramparts of Germany's supremacy there. The event left the land's fate into the hands of both Great Britain and France first, and then of France alone. A part of the land was given as a reward to the British who brought it under its Ghanaian jurisdiction. However, France did not want to follow the British example by allowing the rest of the land to join Benin but kept it as a separate country with a north-down-to-south frontier of two French-colonized countries. In more than many regards, France's role in every single reality of Togolese life has been questioned since, a France whose ubiquitous presence in the life of Togolese has opened another Pandora's Box to the nation. The complexly difficult ties France imposed on its colonies were so tightly close that it got a name: Françafrique[8]. France's special control over political and social life in Togo dismally shines even after the country was declared independent in 1960.

This multiple colonial experience, yet far from disappearing, is one of the unique one and yields in more than a double-consciousness. This reality of colonialism is reflected in daily lives when it comes to sending a mail to a different country or finding a direct flight to the U.S. They should be transited through France first. So, with that type of complex consciousness in mind, let us see how dissatisfaction grew about a book that pretended to describe the reader's life and tried to say he/she can make it without being influenced by the spreading tentacles of colonialism.

II. Camara and the White Color

As the debate seems to be over among scholars in the United States and Europe, I want to raise some "coloring" issues that seem to be overlooked, using my personal experience as a native of a West African country with a triple history of European colonialism: German, British, and French colonialisms.

It is a well-known fact that *The Dark Child* was published in Paris, France in 1953 and quickly emerged to the center of francophone African literature as its acknowledged first autobiography. Many readers and critics, especially in the U.S. unquestionably refer to this writer as Camara Laye and thus naturally use Laye as his surname, which is not one. The writer's real

8 Consider, for example "The Dark Side to French African Ties." NPR Broadcast. http://www.npr.org/2013/02/15/172130146/the-dark-side-to-french-african-ties. Feb 15, 2013

name is Abdoulaye (the full for Laye) Camara. Camara is known to be a large family patronymic in Guinea and neighboring countries such as Senegal and Mali. The inversion of names from Laye Camara to Camara Laye is nothing typically African but a colonial fact, a result of the French colonial system in Africa. As a matter of fact, to make a distinction between the French and local people, the colonial masters instituted this form of inversed appellation, last name first, first name last. This in many regards sounds like a strategy of dehumanizing African people before colonial Europe. The situation is so complex that it sows much confusion, not only in Africa but everywhere in the world, when it comes to knowing the difference between first names and last names of people from French-colonized backgrounds9.

Without attempting to reinvent things, this is the reason why it is just normal to refer throughout this work to the author of *The Dark Child* as Laye Camara, not only to make him a normal world writer but also make readers and critics understand that, whether African or not, his name—and other name as well—has no special reason to be inversed. Actually, when in the very text of *The Dark Child*, Marie, one of his girlfriends, is referred to many times as "Madame Camara" (160) and not "Madame Laye," it speaks volumes about this reality. Therefore, the use of Camara throughout this essay just as Balzac, Eliot, Hugo, Turgenev, or Wright would be used, correctly fits in.

Camara wrote his autobiography in the colonial France and intended to publish it with the initial title *L'Enfant de Guinée*. The book's reception initially invited controversy as Camara's contemporaries were rather versed in vexatious issues of colonization's dehumanizing effects on African people and then using literature as a political tool to right things. Many people, however, lionized the book for its authenticity to African culture and civilization. In francophone Africa mainly, where students were early introduced to Camara's book, it becomes a challenge to later read Richard Wright's *Black Boy* without thinking about *L'Enfant noir*. Through a thoughtful contrasting comparison of the two books, Afagla successfully underscores this fact and even plays with the idea that: "As both [books] share the same title, the reader's natural assumption is that they might address the same issue, in more or less the same way" (2003: 2). There is a veiled project by Camara to take a distance from his origins, which can be discovered by the reader. In the context of *The Dark Child*, race relates to the people of Camara's traditional environment who share the same cultural values. This could be understood with the many uses of this word especially in the first chapter. One can understand his being part

9 Examples among many are to be found with Camara Laye, Sembene Ousmane, and the long-time president of Togo; actually, Wikipedia and many other sources have always presented him as Gnassingbe Eyadema, and use Eyadema as they would use Obama, Myung-bak, or Pahor.

of this race as his father helps explain things to him. Several times does he use "our race" to emphasize this (*The Dark Child* 24, 25, 26) but suddenly writes in the next chapter where he mentions the word for the last time: "my father had spoken of the guiding spirit of his race" (37). The absence of Camara's association with the father's race also marks the beginning of his distance from his origins, of his veiled, but now unveiled, "white" preferences and when at the coming of age, he could be later praised to reach the "white man's" wisdom, there should be no doubt. This is also to be construed as an expression of self-denial. Other choices by the writer increase the reader's disbelief in his African authenticity.

Evidently enough, color does not seem to matter for Camara. He does not appear to be influenced by race, by color, although he grew up under colonialism. Nonetheless, the choice of colors by Camara in his *The Dark Child* raises suspicion about his being both influenced and trapped by color. In the exaggeratedly idealized world of the protagonist, where events unfold smoothly and take him to places of dream, where black humanity is made to surpass the boundaries of colors, one color mainly exists: the white color.

Let us consider how he describes his hut when he returns home from Conakry where he attends the French school. "Each time I went home for my vacation I found my hut newly plastered with white clay. My mother would hardly wait to show me the improvements she had made from year to year" (169). Clay, whatever color, is mainly used to either distemper or whitewash houses in African rural zones. This simply gives a new look to the dwelling places, just like the role lime plays in city houses. This is, unless otherwise, what the protagonist's mother was doing over the schooling years of her son. But the way Camara evaluates this "improvement" work of her mother, the way he evaluates the role 'white' clay plays on his mind, and the transformation it gives to his hut do not seem to be innocent. He does not clearly claim that, among the huts in the household, only his personal hut profited from his mother's art but there is great belief it is so. Camara made the maternal figure of the book choose particularly her son's hut to make it white. She does not simply or naturally make it white in sight but what actually occurs here is, "Originally [Laye's hut] had been like the other huts, but gradually it had begun to *acquire* a European look" (italics mine, ibid). The Otherization of family members' huts explains Camara's gradual intellectual and spiritual distance from his origins. How can an essentially African hut, because it was simply chosen to be whitewashed would *acquire* a European look? No other masonic art was applied to this hut, neither was its architecture modified. Camara might believe in progress with the look of his hut, when it turns from what it originally, African-wise, was to what it was gradually, European-white-looking, becoming. The original color of Laye's hut is not revealed, probably purposefully, but its white, therefore new, color is clearly

voiced. Moreover, the choice to simply whiten Laye's hut, and henceforth foster European look, "made the hut more comfortable," and for him this was unquestionably "tangible proof how much [her] mother loved [him]" (ibid). The maternal love that just grows on white-looking walls remains questionable. Moreover, he continues claiming that "Though I spent most of the time in Conakry, I was still her favorite. That was easy to see, and the appearance of my hut emphasized the fact" (ibid). This is another form of strangeness in attitude. If this was the reason for her mother to increase love for him, if her mother chose to make his hut look European, it would mean his mother was encouraging her son to turn European in his future. However, the mother's adamant opposition to Laye's departure for France does not seem to support this idea.

Laye Camara's 'Francophileness' is no longer to be questioned, neither is his faithfulness for French school tradition. But more than that, Camara was simply and too loudly fantasying about whiteness. For instance, the day came when Laye was getting prepared for the airport, to 'bitterly' leave Africa, his beloved family, and his effortless mother who was internally paining to let her son go away, this time farther from her. At this time, Camara chose to describe his clothing: "I was wearing white cotton trousers, a sleeveless sports shirt open at the throat, sandals, and white socks" (187). This picture is, for many reasons, difficult to represent. There is a priori nothing wrong with this type of clothing only that its representation will meet with a complication. As if the other clothes, shirt and sandals, were not any colors, *The Dark Child*'s protagonist chose to reveal the color of his cotton trousers and his socks only. This choice to not reveal the color(s) of the other clothes cannot be any haphazard occurrence. The reader can easily guess the other clothes are not colorless. They simply are *not* white.

In addition, Camara's linking beauty with whiteness is not limited to hut and clothing only. Two girls mainly marked Laye's love story in the book. One was in his early school years and the other he met while at Collège Georges Poiret, a vocational French school in Conakry.

Laye's first love was Fanta, a friend to Laye's sister. It was genuine love between two young persons, the type of love that expresses itself only through naïve and sly behaviors. Camara never revealed Fanta's color and never did he openly express description of her beauty. However, it did not take him long to comment on the color of Marie, the second girl he was in love with when he moved to town to continue schooling. He describes Marie as being "a half-caste. Her skin was very light, almost white" (158). Comment on her beauty unsurprisingly follows: "She was very beautiful, surely the most beautiful girl in her school. I thought her (sic) as beautiful as a fairy" (ibid). Again, Camara's silence about Fanta's color, evidently as naturally black as himself, and stressing Marie's forced whiteness and ensuing fairy beauty is

too informing about the author's fantasying about whiteness, about colonial Europe. Whereas Camara would not describe Fanta in her clothes with much emphasis, he would depict Marie wearing "European clothes" to highlight the "Guinean tunic" (ibid) she wears sometimes during her helping with house chores in his uncle's home. The fact that 'half-caste' Marie could be (very) beautiful might not raise a problem but Camara did not yield the room to doubt about her being the *most* beautiful in her school by using the world 'surely'. In real life, Camara married a certain Marie Lorifo, described as a light-skinned woman, in 1954 and got four children with her. Like in the case of the description of his clothes en route for France, Camara is careful about the description of who will later become true love, true beauty.

Camara lived with other African contemporaries in France and could not ignore the relationship the colonizer established between color and beauty and could have paid attention when it comes to portraying beauty along with color in his African-celebrating book in which many African youths will definitely not see themselves.

The relationship whiteness-beauty created in Camara's mind does not take him to love and dwelling place only. Young Laye's journey on foot to Tindican, his mother's birthplace, was full of marvels, foreshadowing more pampering upon arrival. Excited walk with uncle, dislodged beasts, flying and fleeing birds marked the journey and rendered the walk less tiring; and so did conversations with the uncle. One of the most interesting conversations was about newborn calves. The uncle talked to young Laye about a white cow that gave birth to a calf with a star on the forehead. The appreciation Laye comes to is no surprise: "It must be very beautiful" (45). Remarkably, Camara does not use colors a lot when describing people, places, and things in this book but when it comes to highlighting the slightest presence of whiteness, he does not hesitate. Whether it is the long threads (103, 4, 7, 8), the "boubou" (113, 4), or Kouyate's father (120), Camara would be carefully highlighting what appears to be white in his environment, slowly but carefully devaluing the traditional grounds that prevail in his environment, even the wisdom of his ancestors. One important example is revealed by the praise song for him preceding his departure for France. The song praised him, saying: "Already thou art as wise as the White Man, (…) Verily thou art as wise as the White Man" (142). The argument presented by Camara, under the mask of poetry, is quite problematic for a variety of reasons. Given the nature of Camara's European orientation, from the traditional Mading perspective his claims work to undermine structures of African autonomy in a way not unlike the colonial regimes. Much of this knowledge is represented, traditionally, by the wisdom of his African ancestors, the Manding griots. Camara's Eurocentrism reveals itself in two very important ways in this passage. The transcendence of whiteness dictates Camaras's hand, for it is not a simple white man, but the

"White Man" who serves as the model Self. This European Self is inaccessible to the reader, for the poetic rhetoric adds a temporal divide to the ethnic and ontological ones. In this regard, "Verily thou art as wise" is at once poetic, suggestive of Elizabethan poetic form, and biblical. "Thou art" authorizes Camara as a God-ordained creative Self, one that would be acceptable to a French audience.

Reading Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) offers important clarification about blacks' psyche regarding whites. Richard Wright's call for consciousness seems dangerously to be overlooked by the West African, African black boy, who by the ostensible dint of bringing his work beyond times falls into the trap of white supremacist view.

More interestingly, the first paragraph of *The Dark Child* has always questioned my mind about Camara's evaluation of the white readership he targets when writing his book in France. Many autobiographies about childhood often open with the age of the narrator, except, unless otherwise, for slave narratives where the narrators usually have a vague idea about their age. During slavery, the law did not allow to keep record of the birth date of children which were born. Moreover, babies were separated from their mothers at early age; therefore, not only was motherly affection lost, children (born candidates to slavery) were cast to have a vague idea of their age too. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is one example. When Camara puts this question right at the beginning of a narrative: "How old would I have been at that time?" and answers by "I [cannot] remember exactly. I must still have been very young: five, *maybe* six years old" (emphasis mine, 17). This hesitation about his age both feeds and reinforces stereotypes about people of African descent.

III. Troubling Contrasts with two 'black' Boys

The above troubling remarks about *The Dark Child* portray the reader's refuting the book's failure to respond to colonial environment but made him/her quickly but assuredly find a close way into critical issues that prevail. Contrasting elements that cut the bridge between that book and *Black Boy* are too evident to be discussed more here.

One contrasting idea that easily shows up while reading the two autobiographies under consideration in this paper is the use of race. In the context of Richard Wright, race clearly means color. Issues opposing white victimizers and the victimized blacks are so clearly and circumspectly showcased in *Black Boy.*

Richard Wright is largely understood as someone who sees race in almost everything, even where he should not. Wright's strong ties to the central concern of his 1937 essay, quoted as epigraph, can be quickly felt in his *Black Boy*. Growing amidst and at the same time refuting the racially

onerous environment of the American south, his deep consciousness, as one can encounter many times in his book, was "coloring everything [he] saw, heard, did" (249).

The appearance of train, railroad in both *Black Boy* and *The Dark Child* could not help drawing the reader's attention. It is evident that the American black boy's Jim-Crowed South already offers no surprise for the related story at the railroad station, where young Richard had to travel by train to Arkansas. "At last we were at the railroad station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a "white" line and a "black" line." (*BB*, 46). Undoubtedly, sitting later on the train after the ticket window would also have been made in colors. Although this observation could not be made at the time of Laye, the protagonist of *The Dark Child* (actually, the white population was very little to appear in line at a train ticket window), Camara, who was writing to throw into relief his Guinean/African identity, had his memory escape the terrible reality that surrounded railroads and trains in his so cherished Africa. I am not suggesting that Camara should have decried that in his book, in his childhood memories, yet his legacy for the next generation could turn out to be questionable. As somebody who is only concerned, in his own words, with "the timeless quality of the specific values of our culture," could this reality have freely escaped him? In the book, young Laye and his family "live beside a railroad" and curiously "much of [Laye's] time was spent *watching* the iron rails." (21, emphasis mine).

The Dark Child's protagonist was not restricted and could play all day long. His attraction to the rails, his admiration for the rails, could not have escaped his exceedingly caring parents. It would then have been impossible for his parents to tell him what it took to construct Laye's object of admiration. What is more, in case his parents failed to inform him, history lessons failed to tell him during his schooling year, the idea of a young player, now in memories, spending hours a day watching that token remains questionable. Furthermore, railroads that favored colonizers to have a control of Africans in order to better impose their laws, met with resistance in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many rulers as well as the ruled voiced hostility to that enterprise. Report about Lat Dior Diop's firm opposition to the French Governor Servatius is known and spread throughout the region: "As long as I live, be assured, I shall oppose, with all my might the construction of the railway."[10] Diop was in Senegal, a neighboring country to Camara's French Guinea. This magical world, if it exists at all and "translates the common life of African children"

10 BBC. (2002). Railways. In Story of Africa (Africa & Europe 1800-1914). Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/11chapter12.shtml

(Timeless Value) as Camara claims himself, is pretty difficult to represent in real effects.

Contrastively, as wide gap opens between the West African black boy and the American black boy, Richard's family seems to carefully and accurately translate my own environment, even if not in all aspects. The first scarecrows for young Richard's life are more to be found at home than anywhere else. Richard describes his father as a lawgiver, which denotes an absence of tenderness, dialog, understanding, the reason why Richard "never laughed in his [father's] presence" (10). This authoritative, authoritarian fatherly figure dominates then most homes, and what is more than likely to happen is that when you are beaten in school, you had better not tell back home, lest the father worsen the case, beating you more. By the way, most parents hurry their children to school to be beaten by the 'masters'.

Compared with Wright, Camara seems to be presented as someone who has a positive view of his origins, enjoys peace of mind far from racial turmoils, although he lived under colonialism, although he went to live with the colonizer. Afagla holds that, for Camara, "French colonialism had not been totally negative because he had no identity problem as a result of the colonial encounter" (8). However, Camara does not seem to stick to his African identity and civilization.

As a matter of fact, colonialism seemed to belong to history since many African countries were declared independent and administration seemed to be given back to Africans. The color line showcased in fiction by African Americans, the color line as portrayed by Richard Wright seems to be visible, touchable sometimes. Two colors made distinctive with sharp attitudes, visibly map and trap the life of young Richard. As a prophet, W. E. B. Du Bois moved at the turn of the twentieth century that: "(…) the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (Du Bois, 1982: xi). Indeed, the after-World War I was reportedly the period of incessant race riots in the United States. Blacks' daily lives were tantalized by inhumane treatments such as lynching and amplified forms of segregation. 'Americanness' was suddenly and more officially racialized, and anything black was unwelcome in the society. Race can be said to mean a lot—if not all—in the United States. Consequently, life was hardened for African Americans only because of the color of their skin. Racism became institutionally reinforced and the color line turned out to be the great divide between Blacks and Whites who could not, and because they should not, any longer share the same public facilities. For black intellectuals, race has come to be—and eventually should—be at the center of every discussion. The situation has led to the speaking of a different voice in the African American critical tradition, a voice made of racial discourse. Richard King in the introduction to his book, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals*, writes: "All in

all, race is the modern West's worst idea" (King, 2004: 1). And it dramatically influences the life of black people living in the United States.

Interestingly, Richard Wright colors his grandparents. He even raises an existential question about his grandmother especially, as color arouses curiosity in him. He could easily deduce first that his grandmother was white. "My grandmother was as nearly white as a Negro can get without being white, which means she was white" (39). However, this deduction will soon yield to complexities in him. These complexities range between being and becoming. Simply put, his highly inquisitive mind raises the question whether one is white or becomes white. His mind questions this issue for some time before he decides to ask his mother. "I had begun to notice that my mother became irritated when I questioned her about whites and blacks, and I could not quite understand it. (…) Now, there was my grandmother… Was she white? Just how white was she? What did the whites think of her whiteness?" (47). Implications of race made the young boy raise those questions and more.

Richard's incessant questioning about his grandmother's color is not mere fantasying. Understandably, beyond a mere look, color means something different in the American context. As Richard sees clearly cut lines at the train ticket window and in social stratification matters based on color, as he notices both races would touch only in violence (47), he wonders why her grandmother, white-looking, could live with them, with Richard's black family at all. Logically, something might go wrong with her grandmother's 'whiteness'. The truth was later uncovered to Richard. He learned about his grandmother that she "came of Irish, Scotch, and French stock in which Negro blood had somewhere and somehow been infused" (48). Infusion of black blood, however remote in one's genealogy, just catches up with one's destiny, not naturally but institutionally, and makes the life terrible for Negroes in the American South.

Richard is always reminded about his race. He is called "black little devil" (50), "impudent black rascal" (173) and is to "understand you're black" (203), the church he was brought to by his religious family was a "*black* Protestant church" (166), italics mine. Race, racism, and color visibly are ubiquitous in Wright's account of his childhood, which ultimately harden things for him and narrow his future development. Understandably, Richard Wright does not *invent* race for his own mind but he is made to know that it exists and affects any single circumstance in his life.

Conclusion

I want to end this analysis by reminding again about my background of a reader from an ignored place where racism could not be directly felt, where colonialism seems to be over but, most of all, where the colonizer always appears to have the deepest root and the strongest tie. Being informed

by a mind influenced by a popularized West African black celebrating African culture and the American black boy trying to make a living against all odds, I could not stop questioning the environment that sees me grow up, as the young protagonists of the autobiographies under consideration in this essay do. My mind could feel more easily the reality of the frustrations of the black boy whose life is portrayed as ceaselessly being in the claws of visible racists than the joys of one who carelessly chooses to hide those frustrations.

The role black intellectuals, writers, and critics should play in their community, the role literature should play among the oppressed people, is still under discussion. While the focus on identity seems to be much praised, many questions remain unanswered in terms of loyalty to the "master". *The Dark Child* is evidently "an autobiographical story to be read at one sitting" (Introduction by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, 7), even if that one-sitting reading may not always be easy for all readers. Its plot is almost without complication. Yet, the author's approach to important issues regarding the presence of the black race in a white-controlled world sparks off complications. If Camara was forced by Plon to racialize his book title, there is evidence the text itself could have been too. Camara was the only African writer to be awarded the Charles Veillon prize—a prize originally for European essayists. Conclusively, between the two black boys, only one was really growing 'black' to satisfy the complex reader's mind.

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