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## **Black "Reconstruction" in Europe in African Diaspora Perspective**

Thinking over the notion of "reconstruction" included in the conference theme, I was reminded of quotes about black consciousness from two prominent twentieth-century black intellectuals: the famous American civil rights pioneer W.E.B Du Bois and the Surinamer Sociologist Rudolf van Lier. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, in referring to a form of necessary double-consciousness of Black Americans, Du Bois wrote:

*After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*

Van Lier, writing toward the end of the twentieth century made a similar observation, but took a seemingly quite contrasting attitude:

*As I reminisce over my school class...full of Negroes, Chinese, every type was there. I found it delightful. You didn't think about that difference. It was there... I have had the privilege of being born on the edge of groups and civilizations. I proceed upon the assumption that an intellectual is marginal by definition. If he is not he is not an intellectual, for his intellect places him on the edge and outside the group. And I was born there - between civilizations. What a privilege!*

While Van Lier seems to view his peculiar place in society as an advantage, Du Bois seems to see it more as a curse. However, in other segments of the same essays, Du Bois, like Van Lier, also sees the double-consciousness as a source of special strength, for example, in giving exceptional depth and power to Black music. The main question I wish to raise today is, how should we relate to the fact that we may have inherited shattered cultures and shattered psyche? Is the concept of "reconstruction" even meaningful? Before suggesting possible approaches to address this, I would like to begin a review of some of the historical background, to provide us with a common frame of reference. The answers to my questions must begin with questions. For example, when I am speaking to Blacks in the Diaspora, the first question is: to whom am I speaking; and if I say "we," who am I speaking for? Our paths from Africa are many and diverse. For example, visiting you from the North American region of the African Diaspora, I am a representative of that vast majority of the North American black population descendant from enslaved African brought there, and also often mixed with American Indians. My parents and grandparents were sharecropping cotton farmers in Alabama; and my earlier American ancestors were Africans and Creek Indians there. The term "reconstruction" used in United States history usually refers to the reconciliation of the Southern and Northern states after the American Civil War that saw the end to slavery. The reconciliation in question then, however, was almost exclusively between the whites of the North and South. The interests of the emancipated slaves were systematically sacrificed to facilitate that reconciliation; and the black population was plunged into a status of legal inferiority that for yet another century would perpetuate the enslavement of Blacks in a form of bondage more subtle than formal slavery, but a form of bondage just the same.

Throughout the more than two centuries of United States History Black Americans have attempted many strategies to gain recognition of their full humanity. These have included back-to-Africa movements ranging from the early nineteenth century to the vision of Marcus Garvey in the early twentieth. There were also other colonization schemes for autonomous Black communities in various parts of the United States, Cuba, and as far away as Madagascar. Over the centuries there were periodic national conferences and congresses called for black Americans, and even a few attempts at establishing independent black republics. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries leading Black American thinkers also inspired Pan-African Congresses with the most prominent meetings taking place in Europe. The Trinidadian Henry Sylvester Williams organized a Pan-African Conference in London in 1900. In 1919 the

Harvard-educated historian W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, organized with mixed success the First Pan African Congress in Paris in 1919. Two years later he joined with the French Senegalese parliamentary deputy Blaise Diagne in organizing a far more successful Second Pan African Congress, along with prominent Afro-American intellectuals such as the future famous historian Rayford Logan, the eminent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and the rising great singer Roland Hayes. The 1921 Congress would hold sessions in London, Brussels, and Paris. Also in attendance at that meeting were representatives from Africa and Asia, including Ibidunni Obadende of Nigeria, and some evidence even suggests that a young Nguyen That Tan, later better known as Ho Chi Minh attended the Paris session. Du Bois would also call a Third Pan-African Congress, convening in London and Lisbon in the fall of 1923; and a Fourth in New York in 1927 that drew 280 delegates, including representatives from Haiti, the Virgin islands, the Bahamas, Barbados, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia, Germany and India. Du Bois, with NAACP backing, also participated in the Fifth Pan-African Congress, which met in October 1945 in Manchester, England, in this instance led by an international coordinating committee directed by the Trinidadian Communist George Padmore.

Of all the efforts taken by Afro-Americans toward social justice for people of Black African descent in the United States, the Civil Rights movement proved the most successful throughout the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s The Civil Rights Movement dramatically improved access of Blacks to equal opportunity for educational, economic, and political advancement. However, although this movement helped dismantle much of the legal foundation of inequality, many of the social and economic legacies of slavery persist to the present. Frustration over the limitations on what the Civil Rights Movement could achieve gave rise to brief popularity in the 1960s and 1970s for more radical initiatives such as the Black Panther Party, the Black Muslims during the era of Malcolm X, Marxism, featuring such spokespersons as Angela Davis and George Jackson; and the Black Power movement and a new interest in Pan-Africanism, as reflected in the career of Stokely Carmichael. In the final decade of his life the venerable Du Bois also despaired of further significant progress through the normal civil rights struggle, moved to Ghana, and finally formally joined the Communist Party. Were he alive today, Du Bois would still be disappointed with the results of the civil rights movement. For example, a recent survey by the Washington Post newspaper, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard university revealed that racial bias continues strong. For instance, it showed that 52% of all black men and 25% of all black women reported having been unfairly stopped by police simply because they were black.

I have presented this brief overview of the Afro-American experience as viewed by a North American in order to point out that there has been a constant recognition throughout the centuries of slavery and ever since that peoples of black African descent share a common plight, and should find some collective means of addressing the common problems. I also presented you with the American legacy in order for you to see more clearly how that differs from those that most of you who are Blacks living in the Netherlands can recount. Most recent immigrants are directly from various parts of Africa; earlier waves are from North and South America, the Caribbean, and Indonesia. During my early visits to the Netherlands in the 1970s, as an African American who thought simply in terms of black and white racial divisions, I was astounded to learn that black Surinamers, Antillians, and descendants of the black troops in the Dutch Foreign Legion in Indonesia did not view themselves as united by their common black African ancestry. In fact, among the Antilleans I found a conscious division even between the different islands, and at times divisions drawn on the basis of different shades of black skin color within any given island. This experience taught me much better than years of academic study had that cultural and class differences can sometimes be more powerful than the conventional concept of race. And yet, my reflection over the past century shows striking parallels between the views of black intellectuals in Europe and those in America, and in fact shows these individuals moving back and forth between the continents, demonstrating that the Diaspora truly is global in its dimensions.

The career and organizational efforts of W.E.B. Du Bois, whom I have just mentioned is a good example of this global scope of the African Diaspora. Among the striking careers in Dutch history that illustrate this are those of the socialist and nationalist thinkers Otto Huiswood and Anton de Kom; and the career of the Surinamer sociologist Rudolf van Lier. Huiswood, the grandson of a slave, was born in 1893 in Suriname. In 1912, following a pattern that would be characteristic for many West Indian and South American black intellectuals in the twentieth century, he moved to the United States. There he was working as a trader in tropical products, and later as a printer in Harlem, when he became involved with American socialist and Negro organizations. For a time he was active with a nationalist organization called the African Blood Brotherhood, which advocated establishment of an independent Negro nation in the western

or northwestern United States, South America, the Caribbean, or Africa. By 1920 Huiswood was reputed to be the first black member of the Communist Party USA. In 1922 he was a member of the American delegation to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern). While there he was elected an honorary member of the Moscow city council and had a rare audience with Lenin who was already mortally ill. He was elected to the American Party's Central Committee and later to the Executive Committee of the Communist International. In 1927 he studied at the Lenin School in Moscow, one of the political institutions founded to train elite communist leaders. At the meeting of the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928 he was one of the several black delegates who helped shape the official policy on nationalism, which urged creation of independent Black soviet republics in the Southern United States ("Self-determination in the Black Belt") and in Southern Africa.

This policy stressed, however, that the "Negro question" had to be viewed as primarily a class question related to colonialism and not a race question. This policy was adopted in spite of the fact that only one black delegate, Harry Haywood (Haywood Hall) of the United States, agreed with this main thrust. Two years later Huiswood openly challenged this position in an article entitled "World Aspects of the Negro Question." Although he based most of his detailed discussion of the West Indies on the islands, and focused the statistics he presented only on Jamaica as a representative example, he also mentioned the Guianas as showing similar characteristics, including in this his native Dutch Guiana (Suriname). Huiswood became an authority on conditions in the Caribbean region because he was assigned by Comintern to be the primary organizer there. In the 1930s he and his British-Guianese wife, H.A. Dumont, worked in a number of European cities and in New York.

When in 1941 he finally returned to Suriname for reasons of health, the wartime authorities arrested him without charges and detained him for 22 months in an internment camp whose mixed population of Nazis, Jewish refugees, and anti-fascists reflected the political uncertainty common to a number of European colonies during the war. The government was apparently apprehensive because of his reputation as a radical communist. After the War he and his wife moved finally to the Netherlands, where he took a job with the PTT national communications company, and was a leader in the Surinamer community. Serving for years as president of the nationalistic association Ons Suriname (Our Suriname), he transformed it from a social society into a Surinamer advocacy organization. In collaboration with the two other main like-minded groups, Wie Eegie Sanie (Our Own Things) and the Surinaamse Studenten Vereniging (The Surinamer Students Union), Ons Suriname promoted cultural pride and spoke out against colonialism and racial discrimination in various parts of the world, including the Dutch empire.

The career of Huiswood's more famous contemporary Anton de Kom illustrates even more clearly the extent to which Blacks within the Dutch empire had come to articulate the same sort of penetrating critique of empire as native intellectuals in many other parts of the world during the same period. It shows some of the common contradictions contained in Western societies for non-European intellectuals; the limitations bridling their aspirations and their counterattack using reformist and revolutionary doctrines originating in those very Western societies. De Kom (Cornelis Gerard Anton de Kom) was born in 1898 in Paramaribo, where he also gained a formal education, acquiring a working knowledge of English, French, German, Sranan and Papiamentu in addition to Dutch. After working four years as an office worker in Paramaribo, in 1920 he moved to Amsterdam. He there volunteered for four years service in the cavalry, a fact that is sometimes omitted in later biographical sketches, which are usually stressing his militancy of a different order. He next acquired a certificate as an accountant and worked briefly at a Bank. In 1926 De Kom married Petronella Catherina Borsboom, a Dutch woman. They were to have four children. He was for a number of years a traveling salesman marketing tobacco and coffee for the firm of Reussen and Smulders in the Hague. This ended in 1931 when he was fired, in part because of his growing political activities.

During these years De Kom was intensively involved in formulating a comprehensive approach for opposing colonialism that was socialistic in orientation and envisioned a concerted effort by all the diverse ethnic groups of Suriname and also supported the aspirations of nationalists in Dutch East India and elsewhere. In addition to becoming a public speaker for the cause at meetings and on the radio, he published many articles in Communist and other radical periodicals, worked on related novels, collected Anansi Stories, and wrote poetry and a film script. At the same time De Kom must have been working on his book *Wij slaven uit Suriname* (We Slaves of Suriname), which he published with difficulty only in 1934. A ringing hymn to his homeland, this first history of Suriname by one of its African offspring begins its description of the country as follows:

*...rich in enormous forests,....rich in broad rivers,....rich in natural treasures, in gold and bauxite, in rubber, sugar, bananas and coffee.... poor in men, poorer in humanity. Sranang - our fatherland, Suriname as the Dutchmen call it. The Netherlands' 12th and richest, no, the Netherlands' poorest province.*

This book was to have a tremendous inspirational impact on the subsequent development of nationalism in the Dutch empire. In the concluding chapter, *Weerzien en Afscheid* (Reunion and Parting), he wrote: "Sranang, my fatherland, I have seen you again, and your beauty was just as I had dreamed, longing, tossing in my bed in Holland." Here in alternating poetic and polemical musings he recounts the dramatic developments which occurred during 1933 when he went to Suriname to visit his dying mother.

Upon his return to Paramaribo in January 1933, he had been arrested for suspected political agitation. This turn of events occurred because De Kom had arrived urging organization of the workers and unity of all ethnic groups, in a setting where the colonial elite lived in luxury while the majority of the people were suffering economic hardship, with low agricultural wages, and the urban population housed in slum- Hundreds greeted his arrival at the docks. He set about attending meetings with hundreds of Maroons, Hindustani, Creoles, Javanese, and Indians, attracting hundreds of complaintants some days. His arrest brought masses of Hindustani and Javanese farmers to the city to join the creoles there in demanding his release. More than 4000 marched to the prosecutor's office on that day and were confronted by a detachment of police with fixed bayonets. In a later gathering the police unexpectedly opened fire, resulting in 2 killed and 22 wounded demonstrators. He was released on May 10 only after promising to avoid such agitation. He was then forced to depart with his wife and children for the Netherlands. The governor's solution to the crisis was simply to release him and place him on the boat to Holland. With this even more conspicuous reputation preceding him back to the Netherlands, he was no longer able to find his usual employment there. Now he became fully engaged in radical work, supported in part by the Communist Party, although it is not clear that he ever actually joined it. There is some evidence that he briefly met Huiswood during this period. During the Second World War De Kom joined the resistance; fascism was clearly even a more urgent threat to all that he stood for than colonialism. In August 1944 he was arrested by the Nazis and eventually died in the concentration camp Neuengamme in April 1945.

As illustrations of Black intellectuals, Huiswood and De Kom followed quite similar dissident paths. Rudolf Van Lier, who died in 1987 in the Netherlands, was born in Paramaribo in 1914 and moved to the Netherlands at the age of fourteen. He recalled that in the decades before World War II there was actually reverse discrimination toward colored peoples in the Netherlands. Although he encountered offensive stereotypes in the minds of some of his teachers, he did not find them a hindrance. Studying history, sociology and anthropology in Leiden, he discovered that study in ethnic categories did not even exist in Dutch universities. Therefore during his course of studies he worked at the Sorbonne in 1937 and in the United States, in Chicago for a year after the war. In 1947 he also spent eight months of study in Suriname and the Caribbean. In his resulting classic study, called *Frontier Society*, which was to earn him a chair in Sociology at the University of Leiden, he advanced a new, more realistic interpretation of colonization than the standard Marxist emphasis on class struggle. He instead saw the society as one better explained in terms of a plural society divided mainly along ethnic lines, with even the classes defined primarily by color and with a major role by the ethnic groups in perpetuating the whole. In other words, he advocated recognition of complexity over pursuit of the type of simplicity offered by the Marxist interpretations. He reminded one interviewer that even within the Hindustani community there was the saying: "Never trust a darker Brahman."

Returning now to the questions about double-consciousness, how should we relate to this concept of two-ness? If we speak of "reconstruction," do we mean to eliminate that? Paul Gilmore in his writings on the Black Atlantic advances the proposition that we should simply embrace this hybrid culture that history has given us, rather than resisting it. And what about assimilation into European culture? Both Van Lier's and Gilroy's approach tend to lean in this direction. In order to answer this question we must answer some preliminary basic questions. First, let us consider the population estimates of the Diaspora in the major countries where it is prominent:

**USA** - 36,000,000 **Brazil** - 80-90,000,000 (or 60-70% of Brazil's 110,000,000 population -estimate by Instituto de Estudos Monteiro Lobato, based in Taubaté, Sao Paulo - **England** - over 3,000,000--**France** - 4-5,000,000-  
- **Netherlands** - 400,000. Add the populations of the Caribbean islands, and it is clear that there is a total of well over a hundred million people outside Africa of predominantly Black African Descent.

What is it that joins us **really**: slavery experience? African culture? Victimization by racism? An early twentieth-

century American sociologist Robert Parks asserted that, "Race consciousness is the natural and inevitable reaction to race prejudice.." Or do we just share the same class status? Is there a community of common interests, however defined;? Are there common aims? Does this vary from country to country? What do Blacks in Dutch society have in common with other non- Dutch residents, and with the Dutch? In other words is there **anything**, that **unites everyone**? Is the so-called "melting pot" metaphor an achievable objective? Is assimilation really possible, when some European societies resist the notion that those of African descent can ever be considered completely equal, and where complete mutual understanding is hard to achieve? The recent debate in the Netherlands surrounding the role of *Zwarte Piet* in the *Sinterklaas* tradition illustrates this difficulty.

If assimilation is an option, must African heritage be sacrificed for Africans to fit into European society? Do other non-European peoples who have become swept into the Modern European cultural orbit also experience a double-consciousness in the same way as those of Black African descent? An alternative approach to the "melting pot" that might be popular in the Netherlands is an argument made in a 1924 work by Horace Kallen, an American philosopher of Jewish descent, where he wrote that democracy had encouraged the development of a cultural consciousness and a sense of social autonomy among immigrant ethnic groups. It must be obvious to you by now that I am not going to attempt to answer the difficult questions I have raised here. Answers are not yet feasible because a great deal of education among all the groups concerned will be needed. Special organized initiatives may be needed to bring about such education. As I have shown, this discussion already has a long history; but new solutions must be crafted to fit a rapidly changing, increasingly more globalized world. I would submit that the problems are not really new, and the solutions not necessarily complex. It is rather the consolidation of human will to solve them that is complex.