

# A Note—Imagining an Africa That Never Was The Anti-Racist / Anti-Imperialist Fantasy of Charles R. Saunders' *Imaro* and its Basis in the Africentric Occult

That sage anti-racist and signal anti-colonial *philosophe*, Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, 1968), warns would-be Afrocentrists<sup>1</sup> that knowledge of the glories of the African past, especially prior to the degradations and deprivations inflicted by European colonialism (particularly the slave trade), is of no avail in contemplating and confronting the oppressions of the early 1950s, the period of the Red Scares and Yellow Peril:

I should be very happy to know that a correspondence had flourished between some Negro philosopher and Plato. But I can absolutely not see how this fact would change anything in the lives of the eight-year-old children who labor in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe. (230)

Fanon discounts the political meaningfulness of *recherche skulduggery* in excavating long-lost empires or proving that African Emperor So-and-So was as great an imperialist as Alexander the Great. Bleakly, bluntly, Fanon wonders about the efficacy of such Afrocentric Trivial Pursuits (so to speak), when the liberation of black peoples and the creation of veritable equality and liberation are the urgent needs of the here-and-now:

In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and my future. (226)

Yet, Fanon's ally in Black Liberation Theory, namely, Malcolm X, did see the cogency of articulating a Black riposte to White Supremacy and the Eurocentric perspectives that engender it and symbiotically support it:

I would watch [other black inmates'] faces when I told them . . . that . . . because the white man had completely erased the slaves' past, a Negro in America can never know his true name, or even what tribe he was descended from: the Mandingos, the Wolof, the Serer, the Fula, the Fanti, the Ashanti, or others. (182)

Thus, as the US Civil Rights (i.e. Black Liberation) Movement moved from ballot box to classroom,<sup>2</sup> so too did the demand for courses in Africana—including Swahili—surge in popularity. As Jamaican reggae star Bob Marley sang of the Garveyite need to “Emancipate yourself from chains of mental slavery” (“Redemption Song,” 1980), so too did popular African-American comedian Bill Cosby narrate that most startling documentary, *Black History: Lost, Stolen or Strayed* (1968). No matter Fanon’s cautions about delighting in Black historical achievement as a politico-psychological answer to white racism, plenty of strugglers and strivers for Black Liberation saw Afrocentrism as an essential(ist) component of their programmes.

In his Foreword to *Theorizing Africentricity in Action: Who We Are Is What We See* (Bernard and Brigham, 2012), Molefi Kete Asante limns the determinative concerns of what he prefers to term “Afrocentricity”:

Two physical attacks on Africa, in the form of *enslavement* and *colonization*, led to the internalization of African marginalization, even by Africans themselves. So thoroughly [*sic*] was the acceptance of African peripheralization that Europe was successful in convincing the rest of the world that Africa, the mother continent, was a mere child in human civilization terms. . . . [These facts mandate that] Afrocentrists articulate a counter-hegemonic view that questions epistemological ideas that are simply rooted only in the cultural experiences of Europe and are applied to Africans and others as if they are universal principles. (8-9, emphasis original)

In his *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (2001), Bénédet Bujo also articulates the need for a counter-hegemonic, specifically African-based moral system, to oppose the “presupposition” that “what is good for Europe or North America must be equally good everywhere and for all cultures” (xii). Bujo is particularly and poignantly alarmed by the rise of a more or less Eurocentric “*monoculture*” (xi) that would eclipse, among other Third World cultural options, “the extremely *communitarian* manner” (xii, emphasis original) of African life. In reaction to the global influence of European/Christian/Capitalist ways of being and thinking and doing, Afrocentrists and/or Africentrist deem it essential to remind White Supremacy that Black Lives Matter.<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, Frank Yerby undertakes just such a rebuttal or refutation in his implicitly Afrocentric novel, *The Dahomean* (1971). In his “A Note

to the Reader,” the African-American Yerby declares that his aim, apart from “entertaining the reader,” is to “correct . . . the Anglo-Saxon reader’s historical perspective,” which has accepted too easily the denigration of “the high, and . . . admirable, culture of the African.” Yet, Yerby also alerts his “Afro-American” (his preferred terminology) readers that his goal is veracity, and so, “neither the racist, the liberal, or the advocates of Black Power and/or Pride will find much support for their dearly held and perhaps, to them, emotionally and psychologically necessary myths herein.” Importantly, Yerby subtitles his Afrocentric adventure “*An historical novel*,” and stresses that “every detail in this book . . . is as accurate as it is humanly possible to make it”; thus, “the more strange, bizarre, and outlandish the detail may seem to the reader, the more he [*sic*] can be certain that the writer didn’t invent it.” Yerby’s dedication to an Afrocentric narrative is also a devotion to “historical sociological aspects” derived from “a very fine anthropological study.” He wants us to recognize that he is not writing Fantasy or Science Fiction, but a “historical novel.” In a sense, Yerby hereby respects Fanon’s fulminations against reproducing (i.e., romanticizing) a socio-politically irrelevant, African past, while also agreeing with Afrocentrists that a knowledge of the “real” Africa is essential to dispel racialist mythologies, whether black or white.

Appearing a decade after Yerby’s novel, Charles R. Saunders’ *Imaro: The Epic Novel of a Jungle Hero* (1981) presents an out-and-out fantasy Africa, dubbed “Nyumbani” (back cover), and a hero who may be read as a “counter-hegemonic” response to Tarzan, the white “jungle hero” invented in 1912 by US novelist Edgar Rice Burroughs, who’d gained a new lease on popular-cultural life thanks to a TV serial (*Tarzan*, 1966-1968). Unfortunately, Burroughs’ novels about Tarzan present him as a White Supremacist,<sup>4</sup> and thus a character that Saunders must contest. Saunders is African-American, but came to author his *Imaro* series of novels after relocating to Ottawa, Ontario, Canada’s capital, by 1971, as, not a Vietnam War draft-resister *per se*, but a refugee, so to speak, from the social/racial upheavals afflicting the US at the time. In this sense, too, by expatriating himself to Canada, Saunders followed Yerby, an expat in Spain. Saunders’ “African” novel also traces Yerby in that it is a conscious work of pulp fiction, published by DAW Books, which billed itself, in 1981, as enjoying “Our tenth year leading the sf [Sci-Fi] field” (back cover). The “sf” or SF interest of the publisher is, however, not borne out by the novel itself, which runs closer to Fantasy of the Sword-and-Sorcery genre than it does

to Sci-Fi. (The 2014 Kindle edition of *Imaro* bills Saunders as “The Father of Sword and Soul.”) Imaro helms no space ships and confronts no aliens; his technology is Stone Age iron and brawn that he pits against humanoid lizards and serpents, who nefarious wizards conjure up and grant demonic agency. Fundamentally, then, Imaro is more a response to US writer Robert E. Howard’s Conan the Barbarian hero (first launched in 1932), who is a chivalrous, swashbuckling “Cimmerian” (likely of Northern British stock), barrel-chested, six-packed, given to offer charity to ladies, but no mercy for male adversaries.<sup>5</sup> While Saunders sets his Imaro in an alternative, medieval (or just-beyond-the-Neanderthal-Age) Africa,<sup>6</sup> so does Howard present his hero in an alternative “Hyborian Age,”<sup>7</sup> which seems to require a hyperbolically misty and Gothic northern Europe—the setting of *Beowulf*—where men are proto-knights and women are virtual damsels. Like Howard’s Conan, Saunders’ Imaro exhibits thews, kills off monsters, rescues at least one maiden (Tanisha), and vanquishes malicious and malignant foes. While Conan is himself born a slave, Imaro must liberate slaves, for he himself becomes one:

When the next day dawned, Imaro began to understand the meaning of the word “slave”. . . . During the day, the slaves had been allowed a single meal of millet cake and water—just enough to sustain their efforts until sundown. Now they quietly awaited their portion of a tepid stew made of vegetables. . . . Time passed slowly in the [gold] mines of the Giant-Kings. The days crept by like a procession of slugs across a tree root, each one leaving behind its dull slime of memories: aching muscles, senseless beatings, and, above all, unmitigated drudgery. . . . Yet there was now a new element in the dreary, predictable pattern of the slaves. . . . Thoughts and emotions long-suppressed were beginning to resurface, for Imaro was among them. (99, 107, 111)

Clear is the resonant connection between Imaro’s fictitious enslavement and that of the actual, historical enslavement of Africans—in Africa itself and in Europe and the Americas. Luckily, however, Imaro gets to play violent insurrectionist Nat Turner successfully—if somewhat supernaturally—and brings down the slave empire of the Giant-Kings as if he is Samson among the Philistines (see Judges 16). In the end, Imaro’s feet get “stained crimson from the puddles of blood through which [he] had waded” (133). But this liberation is only antecedent to further peril. Soon, we learn that “pale people” (178)—*Mizungus*—from “Atlan, an island continent” (179), so suspiciously similar to Howard’s Atlantis-descended Cimmerians, are invading “Nyumbani” (179) or Africa, and, with the help of “sorcery,” are crushing kingdoms beneath their heels (179). As a result, “many were

the men and women that were sent across the Bahari Magharibi [“the Western Ocean”—the Atlantic, presumably] in slave ships” (179). Worse, the “Mizungus” believe that “the people of Nyumbani were subhuman, fit only for slavery or the sacrificial altars of the gods of Atlan” (179-80), and the latter should be understood to represent (and/or prefer) Caucasian Europeans. No matter: Imaro triumphs over the Mizungus (206) as he had triumphed over the Giant-Kings. His only fault is that he has permitted hatred to hinder love: “Yet his past was a two-edged sword. In the past there lingered the hate that wounded love” (203).

That last quotation might remind one of Fanon’s latent humanitarianism wherein he, too, asks that we not let the past injustices of imperialism and slavery fill us with a paralyzing and debilitating hatred of the oppressor. But even if such is also the last-minute interest of Imaro (or Charles R. Saunders), the hero and his author are both committed to reminding Africans (“the Giant-Kings”) of their complicity with the Transatlantic (African) Slave Trade and to reminding Europeans (“the Mizungus”) of their dehumanization and exploitation of Africans. Thus, Saunders seems interested in articulating historical facts via a fantasy narrative that also has the positive result of reconfiguring the Transatlantic (African) Slave Trade as opportune for effective, heroic (superhuman), corrective intervention as well as the European imperialist undertaking of said trade as proving vulnerable, again, to the stout resistance of non-Christian, yet righteously muscular opponents. Nevertheless, Saunders’ investment in Fantasy is no more Afrocentric than is Yerby’s promulgation of a “historical novel.” Indeed, the vaunted facticity of the latter and the wantonly imaginary Africa of the former align, for both delineate an Africentricity or Afrocentricity that is simply the black-marketing of the black-magic occult. Indeed, says Leon Surette, “the strong anti-establishment cast of aesthetic culture in Europe since the Romantics is mirrored in occult history, which is always a history of an oppressed and enlightened alternative culture perpetuating itself only surreptitiously and with great difficulty” (38).

Read in this light, both Yerby and Saunders become hieratic adepts, exposing the real and/or suppressed history of black people in the diaspora—as being either heirs of the noble people of Dahomey or as potential descendants of the unconquerable Imaro. Moreover, says Surette, the “fantasies of a Nordic or Aryan race articulated by Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Alfred Rosenberg bear a family relationship with the historiography of Mme Blavatsky and her theosophical followers” (38). For

Yerby and/or Saunders to answer back to the racist histories pursued by the Caucasian-oriented occult means perpetrating their own blackening of such beliefs. Surette also proposes that “[t]he goal of occult scholarship [I’ll include “Creative Writing”] is to bring into the light this noumenal [spiritually intuited] wisdom, a wisdom supposed either to have been deliberately suppressed by official scholarship or to have been hidden from the eyes of the profane by deliberate and clever disguise” (39). To further my argument, I relate it to Yerby and Saunders carrying out the mission instigated in part by the Cosby-narrated *Black History: Lost, Stolen or Strayed*, whose very title hints that black triumph and achievement has been disappeared by a committed, Caucasian cabal. The solution to this suppression is for learned adepts—like Yerby and Saunders—to restore to black readers especially a knowledge of Africa (real and/or imagined) that serves to buttress self-knowledge. It’s no accident then that Dean Lee, an Africadian<sup>8</sup> high school teacher, affirms Asante’s advice (as of 1991) that “our students are empowered when information is presented in such a way that they can walk out of the classroom feeling that they are a part of the information they absorbed” (63). Likewise, N. Akbar posits that “each generation has the responsibility of maintaining the level of consciousness attained by the previous generations, and of advancing the community to even higher levels by developing their own consciousness” (qtd. in Beals 118).<sup>9</sup> This proviso means that each generation needs to expand Afrocentric knowledge, an end that both Yerby and Saunders must laud. Another Africadian educator, Malik Adams, maintains, “In Eurocentric educational contexts, African people are rarely exalted for their accomplishments and achievements. The fact that we have survived the ‘Maafa’ or Great African Suffering is the ultimate testament to our greatness as a people, and this must be a starting point for Africentric education” (89). To achieve this end, Saunders’ dreamt-up, African swashbuckler, who is anti-slavery and an embodiment of Black Macho, must serve just as well—archetypally—as would Yerby’s research-backed excavation of Dahomey’s classical pre-European-contact culture.

Yet, the politics and philosophy of this endeavour cannot escape imbrication in the occult thinking outlined above, a point given cogent poignancy by African-Canadian literary critic A. Lassissi Odjo, who suggests that the most subversive secret history that African-heritage scholars must overthrow is the obscuring of Africa as “the birthplace of spirituality, poetry, and metaphysics” (xiv). If we venture beyond the

vaunted “Hebraism/Judaism and Greece” origins of Western canons of thought to notice the pre-emptive centrality of Africa, then “the African and Afrodiasporic subject, now anchored in a recovered cultural memory that reaches almost into Deep Time,” can undertake the liberating work of self-conscious, cultural assertion (xiv). For Odjo, it is especially important that Pan-Africanist scholars be able “to explore anew and organically avenues of being and of thought that the clamour of Judeo-Christian detractors of the ‘Black’ Other caused it to abandon or background in self-doubt or resignation” (xiv). That Saunders and Yerby produce *Africas* (plural) that contest (via marginalization) Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman conceptions of black people is both properly Afrocentric/Africentrist *and* an acceptance of occult thought, rendered thus progressive. This investment is legitimate, however, as a means of reinstituting a *culture* of undoubted African-heritage genius and ingenuity so as to overcome the *cult* of White Supremacy. The other consequence? That, well, for instance, Barack Obama is not the product of historical actors who include Jesus, Luther, Marx, Lincoln, Garvey, Fanon, X, and Martin Luther King Jr., but is, rather, the spiritual descendant of the ancient Egyptian god, Osiris. But one has to be an occultist (Afrocentrist) to see that truth . . .

#### NOTES

- 1 A major promoter of Black African influence upon world history and world cultures/civilizations, African-American anthropologist Molefe Kete Asanti has popularized the term Afrocentrism. Among those his work has influenced are African-Nova Scotians (or Africadians), who have changed Afrocentrism’s “o” to “i,” perhaps to emphasize the Africa within the term they choose to use, Africentrism. However, the “Scotian” variant on Afrocentrism does not deviate in conceptualization, so that Pan-Africanism and Black Pride and Power (Empowerment) remain central tenets of the philosophy and pedagogy of Africentrism. This paper employs both terms, but they are mirror synonyms.
- 2 To review this history, see Van Deburg, pp. 63-82.
- 3 The connection between scholarly promotion of Afrocentric epistemologies and socio-political activism possesses a genealogy that stretches back at least to Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) with his mutual emphases on Black Liberation from slavery and insistence on black pride; and then on to Malcolm X (1925-1965), who popularized the switch in self-identification from “Negro” to “African” (with or without a nationalizing hyphen) and also argued for armed self-defence versus (white) police forces; and also on to Angela Davis (1944-), whose writings explore the intersections of oppression (gender, race, and class), and who also has been a life-long political activist. International exemplars would include figures like Guyana’s Walter Rodney (1942-1980), and Canada’s Burnley “Rocky” Jones (1941-2013) and Joan Jones (1939-2019), etc.



- 4 Opines John Newsinger, Burroughs' hero is so irredeemably Negrophobic that he enjoys murdering African "savages," pp. 61.
- 5 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conan\\_the\\_Barbarian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conan_the_Barbarian) ("Conan the Barbarian.")
- 6 The back cover copy advises, "Imaro's saga will be compared with that of Conan and other heroes of history and legend and will rise above them for authenticity, for vivid conception, and for gripping reading." Prophetic?
- 7 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conan\\_the\\_Barbarian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conan_the_Barbarian) ("Conan the Barbarian.")
- 8 African-Canadian—especially from East Coast Canada. (See Clarke, 1991).
- 9 N. Akbar has also published *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery* (1996) whose title, like Marley's line in "Redemption Song," riffs on Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey's actual, 1937-spoken sentence, "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery, for though others may free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind" (Garvey).

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