Response

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I. Carole Boyce Davies Challenges "The Contemporary Transnational"

For nearly twenty years, Carole Boyce Davies has been illuminating the worlds of African and Black Atlantic cultural studies with her insights on the literatures of many peoples. On the broadest range of questions of the oral and written, the properly African and the diasporic, the lives of women, and the claims of theory, Professor Boyce Davies has taken a major role in that great collective labor of giving voice and standing to peoples who have for too long been underrepresented on the global stage. Now Professor Boyce Davies has come to the Macalester International Roundtable to address, from her own range of perspectives, a set of questions on globalization, transnationalism, literature, and culture that ordinary or sane mortals might think to be impossible, such as, What do we mean when we speak of the global? How is this thing called "the transnational" articulated in various parts of the world? And what is the role of the creative artist in this enterprise?

As you have just read, Carole Boyce Davies' answers have been dense and complex, even circuitous, and have called upon an extremely broad range of references, both artistic and scholarly, which, though necessary to her response, may have been unfamiliar to the general reader—to say nothing of a scholar of the Black Atlantic such as myself. This puts me, therefore, in a difficult situation as a respondent. One part of me, of course, wants to respond to her as one specialist to another: to ask her to clarify a range of uncertainties throughout the paper; to question the *terms* by which she links cultures on four continents and an archipelago; to push her further to provide extended, close readings of a few touchstone texts to deepen the broad (perhaps too diffuse) survey she has proposed; and to ask of her notion of "the transformational"—a transformation from what to what?

Now, if Professor Boyce Davies and I were corresponding in detail and at length over a manuscript in progress, or if I were

her outside reader at the journal *Research in African Literatures*, or if we were together at a week-long seminar on the Black Atlantic held in, say, Dakar or New Orleans, I might offer such close and detailed critiques. But my situation in this response is that of the Macalester International Roundtable and the third volume of *Macalester International*, both generalist forums, in which the disputes of the specialists' seminar are perhaps best left behind, and in which my primary responsibility as respondent is to the reader. Thus in the remarks that follow, I would like to do two things. First, I'd like simply to spell out what I believe one of Professor Boyce Davies' essential messages is. And then I would like to provide examples from two great twentieth-century Afro-diasporic writers—Langston Hughes and Alex Haley—to extend with both clarity and global scope the message Professor Boyce Davies has brought us.

Let me begin by distilling that message. As readers of this volume will know, each of the featured contributors in this issue of *Macalester International* was challenged to comment on the apparently *new* phenomena of globalization and transnationalism from the perspectives of their life's work: from an East European perspective in the case of Andrei Codrescu; a Classics perspective in the case of Mary-Kay Gamel; an African and Afro-diasporic perspective in the case of Carole Boyce Davies; and so on. And yet Professor Boyce Davies has argued that from her perspective, perhaps one of the key presuppositions of our challenge to her was wrong. In the world of contemporary globalization, the Macalester challenge presupposed, much seems to be new. No longer can one assume that people will die near the place they were born. No longer can one suppose that the language, religion, or even ethnicity of a grandchild will be that of the grandparent. And no longer can one think of cultures as relatively discrete wholes. Rather, this brave new world of the shrinking planet, deterritorialization, or whatever one might call it, is characterized by instability and flux, hybridity and syncretization, and by a complex interplay of the global and local.

Professor Boyce Davies has given us several excellent Afro-diasporic examples of this, notably in the Brazilian public ritual or performance of *candomblé*. *Candomblé* preserves in it elements of a range of African cultures, and yet at the same time it represents a *combination* of African elements that exists nowhere in

Africa itself. In addition, Afro-Brazilian *candomblé* is sustained as a resistance against a counterposed European culture that seeks dominance in Brazil. And yet Afro-Brazilian *candomblé* incorporates, at times, many indigenous *South American* cultural elements, and *candomblé* counts as close cousins other spiritual systems in both the Caribbean and North America. Four continents, then, hinged around an archipelago, half-sharing half-shares of yet other half-shared networks. Transnational and global *candomblé* indeed.

What is interesting from Carole Boyce Davies' perspective is that this *candomblé* is by no means a product of the so-called contemporary or postmodern transnational moment. *Candomblé* depends neither on airlines, nor on the Internet, nor on borderless corporations. It is, rather, an artifact of a multicontinental, transatlantic slave-and-plantation system whose origins go back at least to the year 1516, when the first Africans were dragged in chains by Iberian venturers into servitude on Hispaniola (the island that now comprises the Dominican Republic and Haiti). Thus the Afro-diaspora and its cultural productions are a de- and re-territorialized form of globalization that has continued uninterruptedly for some four hundred and seventy-nine years, and it is still going strong. And so Carole Boyce Davies' message may be: transnationalism, globalization, deterritorialization — nothing new for us indeed.

In the great bulk of her paper, Carole Boyce Davies articulates the specifics of this centuries-old Black Atlantic system. She discusses the creation of alternative physical and spiritual places by Black Atlantic culture and details many of the forms it takes: the African-American woman's novel, Marcus Garvey's early-century "Back to Africa" movement, the music of Bob Marley, and novels by writers such as Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri, to name just a few. It's a dizzying network, characterized, she says, more by reelaboration than by hybridity. For her, the Cuban exile poet-writer Antonio Benítez Rojo is one of the key theorists of this dynamic.

One of the main features of this time-honored Afro-diasporic network, according to Professor Boyce Davies, is that it is separate from, or rather resistant to, that *other* global network — the much more recent and awfully fashionable postmodern military-industrial-Disney-Coca-Cola-Benetton-and-CNN network,

which tends — though not always successfully — to smooth out local differences and impose some sort of universal order. And so the Afro-diasporic network, though diffuse, internally differentiated, and multicontinental, is also quite specific: it does *not* cover the entire globe and does *not* pretend to universal relevance. In this regard, Professor Boyce Davies has resolutely refused the temptation of expanding her claims to anything beyond the Black Atlantic system. Her range of references has been, as I have noted, quite dizzying, but has not extended, for example, to Japan, or Ireland, or Russia.

II. Langston Hughes: The Afro-Diaspora in the Global Sphere

I respect that restriction greatly, and yet at the same time I *always* give in to that temptation. And so, as Carole Boyce Davies' respondent, I would like to take her paper one step further by suggesting that the Afro-diasporic network not only constitutes one sort of alternative or resistant transcontinental system, but that its perspective can indeed sustain a fully global vision. To support this bald assertion, permit me to spend some moments with two great authors in the Afro-diasporic network: Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) and Alex Haley (1921 – 1992). Langston Hughes, as many will know, was the great poet of the Harlem Renaissance, and from the twenties to the fifties he was a leading man in Negro letters.

What is less well known is that from 1931 to 1938 Langston Hughes became a global wanderer. Starting out at his mother's home in Cleveland, the twenty-nine-year-old Hughes traveled south to Florida, and from there went on to spend many months in both Spanish-speaking Cuba and French- and Creole-speaking Haiti. After a brief return to his beloved Harlem, Hughes began a long literary tour of Negro schools and churches throughout the American Deep South — the first time in his life he had ever been there. After traversing the American Southwest and dipping briefly into northern Mexico, Hughes wound up in San Francisco and, thanks to a generous benefactor, was able to spend several months on the northern California coast writing and in contemplation. Then, Langston Hughes unexpectedly received an offer to work as a screenwriter for a new Soviet film in Moscow — and so he went. After some months of

fitful work on the project, however, the entire film fell through, but by dint of persistence and good contacts, Hughes managed to stay in the Soviet Union for the balance of 1932 and well into 1933. From Moscow he traveled into Central Asia and resided in the ancient cities of Samarkand, Tashkent, Ashkhabad, and Bokhara. From there Hughes continued on to the Soviet Pacific, passed through Korea, spent time in Japan, took an extended visit to Shanghai in China, and then returned, after a short stay in Hawaii, to San Francisco. Not long afterward Hughes moved to Mexico City, where he worked as a journalist and translator for more than a year, then returned to New York to oversee the opening of one of his plays on Broadway, then traveled to Spain to cover the Spanish Civil War for U.S. Negro newspapers, and, finally, at the end of this eight-year odyssey, the now thirty-seven-year-old Langston Hughes wound up in Paris.

What is especially interesting from the perspective of this issue of *Macalester International* is how Langston Hughes was able to turn the apparent "limitations" of a "racialized" world-view into a powerful tool for analysis of global structures. Hughes's lengthy memoir of this period, *I Wonder As I Wander*, is overflowing not with Afro-diasporic, but with Afro-*planetary* moments.[1] I'd like to relate just one of them here. While living in Tashkent in Central Asia in 1933, Hughes hired an elderly and formerly aristocratic Russian woman to cook for him while he convalesced from a major illness. With compassion and a sense of understanding, Hughes tells us of this woman's life. Grasdani (Russian for "citizen," which she preferred to "comrade"), he writes, "for woefully little remuneration prepared my meals, nursed me back to health, and talked to me by the hour in a flow of Russian which I began to understand more and more."[2] With a certain sympathy, Hughes recounts how this woman had undergone severe dislocations when the Soviets came to power, and how the recent rise of formerly nomadic Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Tartars under the Soviets left Grasdani, like many other elderly Russian women, in a changing Central Asia, angry and upset. And then Hughes writes, "In my heart I was sorry for these irreconcilables"—but then he follows these few words of sympathy with a parenthetical remark of unreal power. Let me back up and quote the entire sentence—take note of the punctuation:

> In my heart I was sorry for these irreconcilables (just as my slave grandparents must have been sorry for certain of the gentler aristocrats of the South when the Yankees came).[3]

A remarkable sentence. Here we had been reading a lengthy narrative of Central Asia circa 1933, with an apparently neutral observer expressing understanding for a dislocated aged Russian woman. And then, without warning, our observer drags us back to the American South circa 1869, and the message, though masterfully understated, is unmistakable. The Central Asians, Langston Hughes is claiming, are colored people just like him, black like me, "Negro Orientals," as he puts it, fighting against the oppression visited upon them by the European world. Hughes had in fact been traveling in Central Asia with the later famous Anglo-German-Hungarian writer and journalist Arthur Koestler (1905–1983), and had debated with Koestler about the changes they were seeing. "To Koestler," Hughes writes, "Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me it was a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites."[4] To really understand the 1930s changes in Soviet Central Asia, changes that today we'd call "local/global" movements, Hughes would write, "you must observe with Negro eyes."[5] With Carole Boyce Davies in mind, I'd update that formulation: you must observe the world with Afro-diasporic eyes.

III. Alex Haley: Ireland in Afro-disaporic Perspective

Before closing my remarks, I'd like to bring up one last instance of how what Carole Boyce Davies has termed the transformative, Afro-diasporic perspective can illuminate a far distant global situation. And my example will come, appropriately enough for Macalester, from the files of a former World Press Institute associate, *Reader's Digest* contributor, and DeWitt Wallace protégé, Alex Haley. As many know, in 1965 Alex Haley published his collaborative *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and eleven years later he offered the world his pathbreaking historical novel *Roots*, which apparently traced Haley's heritage across the historical abyss of the Middle Passage and claimed to have

identified, in Africa, exactly the village from which Haley's ancestors had come.

What is less well known is that while preparing his research into *Roots*, Alex Haley pursued not only his African but also his Cherokee, English, and Irish ancestry. And, in the fall of 1966, Haley became a member of the Irish Genealogical Research Society and traveled to the Emerald Isle. Passing through his paternal grandmother Queen's two Irish grandfathers, James Jackson and Jim Baugh, Haley traced himself to the small Irish village of Carrickmacross, circa 1707, forty-three years before the apparent birth of Kunta Kinte in the Gambia. And so in the fall of 1966 Alex Haley left the Dublin archive and went to this little town, showed up at the local pub, and introduced himself—this Afro-diasporic man—as a long-lost son of that Irish village. In a document located deep in the files of the Haley Archives in Knoxville, Tennessee, one finds Haley's report of that remarkable encounter, in a letter he wrote to his *Reader's Digest* editor, Maurice Ragsdale, dated December 14, 1966.[6] "They were most hospitable," Haley wrote in that letter, "until," he continued, "they learned I'm Protestant."

What a remarkable Afro-diasporic moment — a transformational moment, as Carole Boyce Davies would put it. Suddenly, and in a flash, as we saw with Langston Hughes, the extension of an Afro-diasporic network into an unexpected place—in this case into a small pub in Ireland — lends insight into an intractable situation. This extension speaks of the multiple axes of identity that we all contain, some of which we are entirely unaware. It speaks of the history of the Irish peoples, of its crimes and the difficulty of their resolution. It speaks of how no culture's discriminatory priorities are universal. It speaks, of course, to the unsettled status of the diasporic peoples of the Black Atlantic. In its telling absence from the final text of the massively popular if academically banished *Roots*, it speaks to the social construction of identities through fiction. And, among other things I could go on to list, it speaks of humor. These Afro-diasporic moments, to conclude, coming as they do from the transformative pens of creative artists such as Hughes and Haley, do full justice to what Edward Said, in his masterful contribution, has termed the writer's moral *and* dramatic functions, and in so doing they provide a better Afro-diasporic, *and* global, vision.

Notes

1. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). Hughes's prior volume is *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). The canonical account of Hughes's life during this period is Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1: 1902–1941: I, Too, Sing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2. Langston Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander*: 146.

3. Ibid., 147.

4. Ibid., 111.

5. Ibid., 111. Arthur Koestler's eventual fictionalized account of the darker side of what the two men saw together is his classic *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (1940; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1968).

6. For details, see letter from Alex Haley to Maurice Ragsdale, editor of the *Reader's Digest*, dated 14 December 1966, Haley Archives, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Box 3/80, Folder 10. Also of interest is Alex Haley, "Researching the Unknown," *Writer's Yearbook* 44 (1973): 26–30 and 106; and, of course, Haley's great work, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976). An essay dealing substantially with Haley's "multiplicity" would be my "Routes: Alex Haley's *Roots* and the Rhetoric of Genealogy," *Transition: An International Review*, n.s. 4.2, no. 64 (Fall 1994): 4–21. The primary gateway to Haley scholarship is my "Revisiting a Silenced Giant: Alex Haley's *Roots*: A Bibliographic Essay, and Research Report on the Haley Archives at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville," *Resources for American Literary Study* (forthcoming).