



Biko, who died in police custody in 1977, spoke excellent English, but it was not his mother tongue. He was acutely aware of being at a disadvantage in English-speaking company. He spoke before his death of the frustration of talking to articulate, intelligent, native English speakers.

“You may be intelligent, but not as articulate,” he said.

La langue

Je plonge, la tête la première, dans cette mer de sons familiers. Un air connu qu'on fredonne aisément, même si ça fait longtemps qu'on n'a pas entendu la chanson. Bousculade de mots, de rythmes dans ma tête. Je nage sans effort. La parole liquide. Je ne cherche pas à comprendre. Mon esprit se repose enfin. On dirait que les mots ont été mâchés avant qu'on me les serve. Aucun os. Les gestes, les sons, les rythmes, tout ça fait partie de ma chair. Le silence aussi.

Je suis chez moi, c'est-à-dire dans ma langue.

« Ce cœur obsédant qui ne correspond
Pas à mon langage, ou à mes costumes,
Et sur lequel mordent, comme un crampon,
Des sentiments d'emprunt et des coutumes
D'Europe, sentez-vous cette souffrance
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal
D'apprivoiser avec des mots de France
Ce cœur qui m'est venu du Sénégal. »



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 [All Inboxes \(289\)](#)



biosexuality. Fiction and poetry, I think, play an important part in imagining new possibilities and discovering old one.

TP : Est-ce donc plutôt que vous vous reconnaissez une solidarité en littérature et par la littérature, une sorte de bibliothèque universelle, qui transcenderait les espaces et remonterait dans le temps aussi ?

DL : Oui, c'est ça, c'est le don de soi, des angoisses, des nuits blanches, des joies secrètes, dans les fêtes intimes à travers le temps. Tous les écrivains, quels qu'ils soient, de quelque langue ils soient, de quelque époque ils soient, ont donné à notre culture. Quand je pense à Goethe, je ne pense pas que c'est un Allemand ; assurément, il vient d'Allemagne, avec une famille et des voisins, mais ce qu'il a donné et qui est parvenu jusqu'à moi, cette énergie est un don de soi qui fait partie de l'héritage humain. Qu'on vienne de Port-au-Prince, comme Jacques Roumain, ou de Martinique, comme Édouard Glissant, ou de Russie, comme Tchekhov, c'est toujours ce même don de soi qui est très émouvant. Nous donnons si peu, et là brusquement nous avons des gens qui se donnent entièrement. Leur énergie traverse les siècles pour nous rejoindre, nous permettre de passer un bon moment et de voir que nous sommes ni totalement perdus, ni totalement seuls. Nos intimités, nos cœurs sont à la fois différents et semblables. Qu'ils viennent nous dire cela, je pense que ça fait partie d'un héritage humain que je ne suis pas prêt à diviser en petites portions de lieu, de langue, de classe, de race, de quoi que ce soit. Pour une fois que nous avons la possibilité d'avoir un héritage commun!

We take for granted the social and cultural milieu and philosophy that produced Mozart. As Western people, the socio-cultural thinking of eighteenth-century Europe comes to us as a history legacy that is a continuous and organic part of the twentieth-century West. The socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro in America (as a continuous historical phenomenon) is no less specific and no less important for any intelligent critical speculation about the music that came out of it. And again, this is not a plea for narrow sociological analysis of jazz, but rather that this music cannot be completely understood (in critical terms) without some attention to the attitudes which produced it. It is the philosophy of Negro music that is most important, and this philosophy is only partially the result of the sociological disposition of Negroes in America. There is, of course, much more to it than that.

It's funny. Recently a cat told me, "R&B is dead! Hip-hop is dead! Black music isn't soul music," and this was a nigga saying this! I'd never heard a person of color say anything like that about our shit, and it bothered me: this black man who was dating this white woman, saying that black music is dead. This was a real conversation. Face-to-face with a dude, a keyboard player. He said black music is dead. I always keep that in the back of my head.



humansofny

2h



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humansofny "I was an international relations major. I was thinking about going into government, but the more I learned about bureaucracy, the more I realized I'd be better off just writing political songs."

qui compte, c'est ce qui est. Et ce qu'on fait avec ça.

Spike Lee s'était mis debout pendant que je hur-
lais. Il avait déjà pris son blouson.

— Demande-lui, Spike, ce qu'il veut dire par là,
intervient Sam... Ce n'est pas en filant que tu vas éli-
miner sa question.

À ce que je vois, Sam a une certaine influence sur
Spike Lee. L'écume à la bouche presque (une rage
froide), Spike se rassoit après un moment d'hésita-
tion. Sa main droite tremble légèrement.

— Justement, je ne veux plus lutter, dis-je. C'est
en luttant sans arrêt qu'on perd son énergie. L'énergie
vitale. C'est uniquement dans la création que je veux
me retrouver.

— Tout le monde aimerait s'occuper de choses
plus amusantes, jette Spike, un rien méprisant...
Qu'est-ce que tu crois!... Il y a un travail à faire et il
faut le faire.

— Même au prix de son art.

— C'est quoi ça ? Ne me dis pas que tu crois dans
ce boniment de Blanc ! Je veux faire les choses de la
manière la plus efficace possible. Je veux dire la vérité.
La vérité sur notre passé et notre présent. C'est ça,
mon travail. C'est un travail qu'il faut faire parce que
rien n'a changé dans ce pays.

— D'accord, les Blancs n'ont pas changé, et là, je
n'en suis pas tout à fait sûr, mais les Nègres... Les
Nègres ont changé. La preuve : tu fais des films. Pour
un gars d'un ghetto de New York, tu ne crois pas
que...

" La démocratie. c'est comme de l'eau: on peut la mettre dans un verre. dans une tasse. dans une bouteille. dans une assiette. etc. Dommage que les Africains ont préféré la garder dans un verre, au lieu de la mettre dans unealebasse... " (Mwange, Kalima Nkoma)

"Democracy is like water: you can put it in a glass, in a mug, in a bottle, in a plate, etc. It's unfortunate that Africans chose to keep it in a glass, rather than pouring it inside a calabash..." (Mwange, Kalima Nkoma)

He was shoddily buried in a makeshift grave with — according to some accounts — his arm protruding; so he was reburied, then disinterred a second time and eventually dismembered, the body parts dissolved in battery acid. The Belgian thug responsible for this pulled out two of his teeth as souvenirs. They were capped with gold.



[Pont : Aimé Césaire]

"D'une identité, c'est sur, d'une identité, réconciliée

Avec... avec l'universel

Pour être universel, il fallait commencer par nier que l'on est nègre

Au contraire, je vous disais : plus on est nègre, plus on sera universel"

We lived nine years in West, East, and Central Africa, two years in France, and nine years in the United States. For five out of the nine that we lived in the United States, my wife and I kept feeling that we were irrelevant outside Africa. To whom was I teaching black literatures in the United States—people genuinely interested in Africa, or merely students wanting to pick up an exotic grade? Should I not be where black literatures are organized and taught as a functional and organic part of African development, and located, therefore, where there is a living cultural forum for them—on their own native soil? Shouldn't I be spending the rest of my life contributing to this development of the African consciousness?

I had come into a line of tradition in America that had started long ago, and could not grasp the American's cultural goals. I saw them as too fragmented for me to feel part of a unified purpose. I want to teach a community whose cultural goals and aspirations I can comprehend, because education is for me an *agent* of culture at the same time it is culture itself.

I could only identify intellectually and emotionally with the black American's condition, but could not in any tangible, particular way feel his history. To be actively and meaningfully involved in a people's concerns and political struggle as a genuine participant, you *should* feel its history. On the contrary, I kept feeling that *that* river was passing me by. Its complexity defies the oversimplification contained in the assertion, "I am black." And one thing I dislike is intellectual dishonesty, faked involvement that has only repeated slogans to subsist on.

We returned to find most things had not changed, except for the worse. But my wife and I find that we can achieve a number of things in our professions that as long as we were outsiders, we could not. Now we have community. You take your place among the millions of oppressed blacks, you are subjected to the same procedures as they are for restricting movement, choice of jobs, entrances and exits in public places, and so on. You are voteless, regardless of your

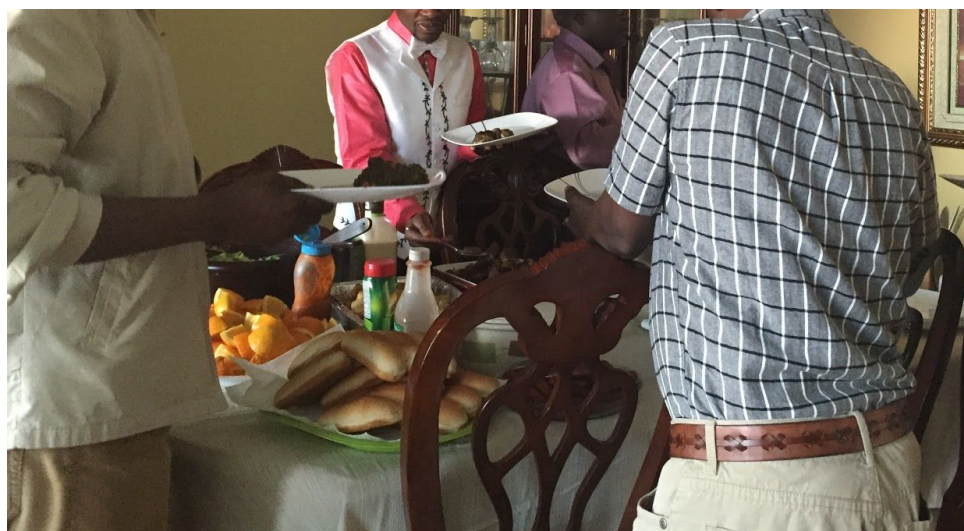
academic standing. In brief, YOU ARE NOT WHITE. But among the community, YOU ARE POSITIVELY BLACK. There is also the faith that no matter what white people do to us, our ultimate goal is bigger than they are, than even we are, and therein lies the moral of a homecoming.

I got to learn, when I was in the United States, that an academic can, if he likes, lose himself in intellectual pursuits, move only in the university community, and be insulated from the rest of the larger community out there, safe, cozy, contented. I didn't want that to happen to me, so that my self-respect hung on the thin thread of long-distance commitment.

I also realized that the longer I was away from South Africa, the angrier, the more outraged, I felt against the sufferings of people here. Out of sheer impotence. In a sense, my homecoming was another way of dealing with impotent anger. It was also a way of extricating myself from twenty years of the compromise that exile itself is. Indeed, exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind.

We left our children in the United States. They will, in their own good time, decide what to do as they grow up. We reckoned that it would be unfair to ask them to accompany or follow us, after having grown up in an atmosphere of relative freedom—relative, but substantial; an atmosphere in which one has a fighting chance to fulfill or equip oneself as a young exile. There is this about exile: there is an age below which it yields tremendous benefits to the individual ego, and there is an age beyond which the local setting can make impossible demands on one's commitment.

Another aspect of my homecoming is that it concludes a cycle in the life of a writer. Like all the other writers in South Africa, I feel the pressure of censorship acutely. But I feel I can deal with this in a way I could not when I was writing outside the context that breeds these tensions. The real sense of community that I feel now helps me understand the nature of my audience better, which must help define the functions of literature at the grassroots level. In more ways than one, I can deal with something tangible, something real, rather than the shadows and echoes that haunted me in exile, the recurrent dream about people coming after me because they believed I had something of value, which I wasn't sure I possessed. Again, my writing can now be the educational tool I want it to be, according to the needs of the audience.



TP : On peut dire que vous êtes un écrivain de l'espace, et vous vous servez du traitement de l'espace pour, en quelque sorte, compenser l'asymétrie symbolique entre les centres littéraires et les périphéries : « Y a-t-il des sociétés plus littéraires que d'autres? Certaines ont donné de bonnes preuves qui nous font croire à leur aptitude, mais je doute que ce soit dans leur ADN. Il est vrai que Paris, Manhattan et Berlin se sont retrouvés plus souvent dans un livre que Petit-Goâve. Je me suis dit qu'il fallait réparer cette injustice. Le monde ne pouvait vivre plus longtemps sans connaître les gens de Petit-Goâve. » (p. 206) D'autres écrivains caribéens (je pense aux Martiniquais Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphaël Confiant) sont des écrivains de la langue. On pourrait transposer votre question : y a-t-il une langue plus littéraire que d'autres? Est-ce que le créole est trop « social », particularisant ou régional, pour qu'on puisse faire le même traitement à la langue que vous faites à l'espace?

DL : Je pense que personne n'est pris dans sa langue. Sinon, on ne devient pas écrivain. Chaque écrivain doit en quelque sorte en inventer une nouvelle. Par ailleurs, comme romancier on écrit beaucoup plus dans la musique, à l'inverse de l'essai ou du journalisme, qui disent exactement les choses. Je crois que c'est peut-être ça l'erreur, de croire qu'on écrit dans sa langue. Il faut arriver à atteindre la musique. C'est même tout le problème de la traduction, d'arriver à capter cette musique. Les mauvais traducteurs, ce sont les gens qui se réfèrent à la langue de l'écrivain qu'ils ont à traduire, alors que l'écrivain doit d'abord effectuer une rupture avec sa propre langue. Il doit déjà se façonner un langage, alors je ne me situe pas dans le fait de créer une langue encore plus locale en prenant des termes qui définissent la région, qui ont une saveur particulière. Je me méfie de toute saveur particulière. J'essaie plutôt de traduire les émotions et les sentiments.

I cannot tell my story without reaching a long way back. If it were possible I would reach back farther still--into the very first years of my childhood, and beyond them into distant ancestral past. Novelists when they write novels tend to take an almost godlike attitude toward their subject, pretending to a total comprehension of the story, a man's life, which they can therefore recount as God Himself might, nothing standing between them and the naked truth, the entire story meaningful in every detail. I am as little able to do this as the novelist is, even though my story is more important to me than any novelist's is to him--for this is my story; it is the story of a man, not of an invented, or possible, or idealized, or otherwise absent figure, but of a unique being of flesh and blood. Yet, what a real living human being is made of seems to be less understood today than at any time before, and men--each one of whom represents a unique and valuable experiment on the part of nature--are therefore shot wholesale nowadays. If we were not something more than unique human beings, if each one of us could really be done away with once and for all by a single bullet, storytelling would lose all purpose. But every man is more than just himself; he also represents the unique, the very special and always significant and remarkable point at which the world's phenomena intersect, only once in this way and never again. That is why every man's story is important, eternal, sacred; that is why every man, as long as he lives and fulfills the will of nature, is wondrous, and worthy of every consideration. In each individual the spirit has become flesh, in each man the creation suffers, within each one a redeemer is nailed to the cross. Few people nowadays know what man is. Many sense this ignorance and die the more easily because of it, the same way that I will die more easily once I have completed this story. I do not consider myself less ignorant than most people. I have been and still am a seeker, but I have ceased to question stars and books; I have begun to listen to the teachings my blood whispers to me. My story is not a pleasant one; it is neither sweet nor harmonious, as invented stories are; it has the taste of nonsense and chaos, of madness and dreams--like the lives of all men who stop deceiving themselves. Each man's life represents a road toward himself, an attempt at such a road, the intimation of a path. No man has ever been entirely and completely himself. Yet each one strives to become that--one in an awkward, the other in a more intelligent way, each as best he can. Each man carries the vestiges of his birth--the slime and eggshells of his primeval past--with him to the end of his days. Some never become human, remaining frog, lizard, ant. Some are human above the waist, fish below. Each represents a gamble on the part of nature in creation of the human. We all share the same origin, our mothers; all of us come in at the same door. But each of us--experiments of the depths--strives toward his own destiny. We can understand one another; but each of us is able to interpret himself to himself alone.

One ends up in exile for a variety of reasons and under a number of circumstances. Some of them are better sounding, some worse, but the difference ceases to matter already by the time one reads an obituary. On the bookshelf your place will be occupied not by you but by your book. And as long as they insist on making a distinction between art and life, it is better if they find your book good and your life foul than the other way around. Chances are, of course, that they won't care for either.