The Reformulation of Ethnological Sources and Orientalist Discourse in Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*

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Abstract

When Saul Bellow composed his renowned novel Henderson the Rain King *fifty years ago, his undergraduate studies of anthropology under the Africanist Melville Herskovics exerted a significant influence. This paper considers the sources of many of Bellow's descriptions of East and West African tribes in the novel. Where Bellow diverts from these sources, his changes will be considered in light of Edward Said's concept of "Orientalist discourse" as set out in Orientalism.*

Introduction

Edward Said (1935-2003) wrote eminently about European writers and scholars constructing a cultural-political interaction with 'the East.' Much of his attention was dedicated to the British and French, whose scholars and artists he regarded as conscious attendants of power and subordination of post-Enlightenment colonialism. Moreover, the 18th and 19th century explorers, missionaries, linguists, archaeologists and ethnologists served in their respective national colonial projects. The eighteenth and nineteenth century Western audiences were provided with an exotic, sumptuous but inaccurate portrait of the Orient, which may be defined geographically, racially, linguistically and culturally as 'the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies.' Not only India, China and the other colonized nations of Asia or the Middle East, but in its wider sense the Oriental encompasses nations in the African continent as well. Said succinctly describes 'Orientalism,' or the scholarly or cultural production of the art, language, philosophy and culture of the East as a representation attributed to an intrinsically inferior position or valuation. Orientalism, or the Western 'knowledge' of the Orient in Said's understanding, has an economic, social and racial setting, and is usually juxtaposed with the superiority of the West. In the novel *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), Canadian-born writer Saul Bellow (1915–2005) wrote about Africans in an exuberant and captivating way. I wish to investigate the

sources of Bellow's descriptions of Africa and African characters in his novel and explore how Bellow altered the material from his sources in a way which in part echoes Said's definition of 'Orientalist discourse.'

The Nobel laureate's preoccupation in intently depicting Africans in *Henderson the Rain King* (as well as Black Americans in other novels) may be traced back in part to experiences in his youth in Chicago. At the time that his family relocated to Chicago, many African American families were simultaneously migrating from the rural South to the industrialized North. Chicago was a promising destination for millions of immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe, such as Saul Bellow's Russian-born, Yiddish-speaking parents who in 1924 moved there illegally, smuggling their children in from economically-depressed Quebec. In this sense, Saul Bellow shared an experience with African Americans, the other major 'outsider' group of recent Chicago immigrants. Indeed, his favorite novel as a boy was Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Initially Bellow studied English literature at the University of Chicago, but transferred after two years of study to nearby Northwestern University to study cultural anthropology. His intellectual interest in Africans may have been cultivated intellectually through his anthropology studies under the Africanist Melville J. Herskovits (1895–1963), who supervised his bachelor thesis on a tribe of Eskimos which had chosen to starve rather than eat available food that was taboo to them. Herskovits encouraged Bellow to continue his ethnological studies at the master's level. After receiving his bachelor of arts from Northwestern in 1937, Bellow enrolled at the University of Wisconsin for the Master of Arts degree program in anthropology. Later Bellow renounced his studies in anthropology when, as he claimed in an interview, he was 'appalled' when he discovered that anthropologists were teaching that all cultural values and beliefs were considered equally valid. Yet in another interview published in 1964, Bellow explained why he was initially interested in anthropology:

> Anthropology students were the farthest out in the 1930s. They seemed to be preparing to criticize society from its roots. Radicalism was implied by the study of anthropology, especially sexual radicalism–the study of the sexual life of savages was gratifying to radicals. It indicated that human life was much broader than the present. It gave young Jews a greater sense of freedom from the surrounding restrictions. They were seeking immunity from Anglo-Saxon custom:

being accepted or rejected by a society of Christian gentlemen. (Steers, 36)

Herskovits, his teacher at Northwestern University, appeared to have interested Bellow in anthropology. In the many interviews, Bellow espoused differing, often contradictory attitudes – portraying himself as a hip kind of radical, for instance, to a literary, often liberal audience – than one finds in the conservative essays he wrote later or the values expressed in his novels. According to a Bellow biography written by *New Yorker* journalist, James Atlas, Bellow claimed to have disliked Herskovits because of his stance on "cultural relativism," believing that being judgmental towards the other cultures under study was essential in order to properly investigate them. Bellow gave Atlas some juvenilia to include in Atlas's authorized biography, one of which attacks his teacher in a slightly sinister register:

There was a guy named Melville J.
Who does oodles of work every day
To prove that Brer Rabbit
And blues on the Sabbath
Came from Old Dahomey (Atlas, 49)

In his study *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits links African culture and African American culture (both in North and South America). Bellow's poem and a passage of *Henderson the Rain King* do not merely contest but even deride Herskovits's claims of the continuity of Bantu culture in the New World. Never getting far in his post-graduate anthropology studies, Bellow married immediately after receiving his bachelor degree in 1937 and enrolled in only one semester of the two-year Master of Arts degree program at the University of Wisconsin. Subsequently, he was engaged in teaching at local Chicago schools and fiction writing.

II. East African Sources in Henderson the Rain King

Bellow had published four novels before this one. *Henderson the Rain King* became his commercially most successful novel up to that point (an unpublished first novel he wrote also centered on blacks). The first part of *Henderson the Rain King* takes place in East Africa while the second half, roughly, transpires in West Africa, although Bellow had never visited

Africa previous to writing the novel. (In February, 1970, he vacationed in Africa for the first time.) As to his non-Jewish protagonist, Eugene H. Henderson, a 50-year-old gargantuan Connecticut millionaire, experiences a midlife crisis. His dissatisfaction with the modern way of life produces in him a deep-rooted anxiety of meaninglessness, and he literally needs to escape a combination of American spiritlessness and ennui felt during the Eisenhower years. The World War II veteran feels hemmed in by "my parents, my wives, my girls, my children, my farm, my animals, my habits, my money, my music lessons, my drunkenness, my prejudices, my brutality, my teeth, my fate, my soul!" (Bellow *Henderson the Rain King* – hereafter cited as *HRK*, 7). Bellow essentially has his narrator say of himself that his excesses are what define him.

Through a friend, and not because of Henderson's own planning, his escape turns out to be an audacious trek through Africa. (Originally Henderson contemplated a visit to the Eskimos.) By means of his flight to Africa and a concatenation of experiences there, Eugene Henderson seeks to achieve self-purification and moral accountability, to strive spiritually and seek out a new personal destiny in salubrious Africa. As he put it to Queen Willatale, Henderson sought in Africa "the wisdom of life" (*HRK*, 77).

Because he had no first-hand knowledge of this continent, Saul Bellow used old anthropological studies and British naturalist travel literature for his descriptions of African people and their culture. For the descriptions of the customs, clothes, beliefs and relationships of his 'Arnewi' tribe, he culled information from ethnographic studies of Bantu tribes in East and Central Africa. Bellow in point of fact uses information from his old mentor's early study, *The Cattle Complex in East Africa*, which was the published version of Herskovits's Ph.D. dissertation written under Franz Boas's supervision at Columbia University. Herskovits referred to the extreme reluctance of the people in East Africa to kill their cattle for food:

> Wherever the breeding of cattle was carried on, it was the custom of the natives never to kill an animal. Only those which died a natural death were consumed, the reason given being that the Skilluk looked upon the possession of living cattle as the main object of their existence (Herskovitz, 27).

Saul Bellow conveys this anthropological information in the first person narrative, in a rather swanky yet reportorial way, offering greater

immediacy than the scholarly text. In the novel, Henderson shows a prodigious interest in these aspects of the local culture:

> You understand, the Arnewi are milk-drinkers exclusively and the cows are their entire livelihood; they never eat meat except ceremonially whenever a cow meets a natural death, and even this they consider a form of cannibalism and they eat in tears. Therefore the death of some of the animals was sheer disaster, and the families of the deceased every day were performing last rites and crying and eating flesh […]
> (*HRK*, 60)

In his doctoral dissertation, Melville J. Herskovits makes reference to some notable attributes of the language, specifically the astonishingly large vocabulary used by East Africans in connection with the cattle:

> Beech's work demonstrates the place cattle hold in the affections of these people. In the vocabulary given under "ox" one finds 28 words to express the various types of cattle, each word describing some peculiarity recognized in the animals. (Herskovitz, 31)

Through Eugene Henderson's description of the 'Arnewi' tribal language, Bellow manages to embellish this anthropological detail and, in the example cited below, boost considerably the number of cattle words in the tribal language:

> You have to understand that these people love their cattle like brothers and sisters, like children; they have more than fifty terms just to describe the various shapes of the horns, and Itelo explained to me that there were hundreds of words for the facial expressions of cattle and a whole language of cow behavior. (*HRK*, 56)

Bellow derivatively reuses other early ethnological studies dealing with East Africa, sometimes a bit too closely, according to Eusebio Roderigues. Reverend John Roscoe (1831–1932), an Anglican Church missionary who oversaw the Mackie Ethnological Expedition in Central Africa, wrote at least three studies which Bellow used as sources: *The Banyankole*, *The Soul of Central Africa* and an article from a British anthropological journal entitled, "The Bahima: A Cow-Tribe of Enkole."

According to Rodrigues, Bellow drew copiously on the information from Roscoe's publications, unctuously reproducing his strikingly exotic fictional East African cultures. In *The Soul of Central Africa*, Reverend John Roscoe relates the aesthetic view which the cattle tribe men held of the women in their tribe and supplied details about the grieving herdsmen when cows fell ill as well as the wrestling matches which function to initiate friendships within the tribes (Roscoe 11, 23). The great amanuensis directly integrated this information into the plot of his novel, altering only a few of the details, mostly paralleling the down-to-earth register as alluded to above. There is much more that is lifted, while other aspects related by the anthropologists Bellow kept out of his depiction of the 'Arnewi,' a tribe which features fundamentally child-like sensibilities and primitive simplicity.

III. West African Sources in Henderson the Rain King

The most substantial integration of ethnographic studies in *Henderson the Rain King* is cited in the 'Wariri' tribe section of his novel based on historical studies on the Dahomey. Bellow extracts heavily from Richard Burton's popular book, *A Mission to Gelele the King of Dahomey*. Making meticulous use of the description of King Gelele, taken from Burton's visits to the king in Aborney, the capital of Dahomey between the years 1863–1864, Bellow emulates these descriptions in creating Henderson's sententious mentor 'King Dahfu.' The physical appearance, demeanor, clothing, eating habits, and behavior of the wives of Burton's King Gelele and Bellow's 'King Dahfu' are virtually identical, down to detailing the precise manner in which tobacco was consumed. As other scholars have pointed out, King Dahfu offers Henderson his life wisdom based upon the radical philosophy of Wilhelm Reich (Rodrigues 1973, 212-233), whereby this philosophy is articulated in a folksy African way.

A number of deviations from Burton's publication Bellow used are also striking. The competition between the king and the Amazon women warrior differs from Burton's report of the celibate women warriors having a pronounced masculine physique. Burton writes that "the female harshness of feature and robustness of form rival the masculine". (Burton 147) On the other hand, Henderson appears concupiscent before them. Bellow's fictional interpretation of the beautiful African sylph accentuates his proclivity for much more erotic and enticing Amazon women warriors. Given the ardor of this episode, Bellow is furtively silent about the celibacy Burton refers to in his *Mission to Gelele the King of Dahomey*. Above and

beyond the sensual changes in content, Bellow dedicated greater attention to stylistic vigor of the descriptive language via Henderson, his quipster-narrator. As Eusebio L. Rodrigues avers:

> Bellow's genius [is] for transmuting bare facts into vivid dramatic events, clearly revealed in the animated, colorful, skull-tossing contest between the magnificent King Dahfu and the beautiful girl who leaps "like a giant locust" (HRK, p. 164) […] Bellow clearly owes a tremendous debt to Burton's A Mission to Gelele the King of Dahomey for numerous physical details about King Dahfu, his court, and the Wariri. The evidence of his debt is overwhelming.
>
> (1971, 148)

What Rodrigues asserts as "genius for transmuting bare facts" Edward Said would likely regard as 'Orientalist discourse,' for Bellow associates African women with the escapism of sexual fantasy, for Freud a cathexis and for Edward Said a concupiscent literary discourse paradigmatically established by earlier writers of the Orient such as Gustave Flaubert, André Gide, Joseph Conrad, Sumerset Maugham and many others (Said 1979, 190).

With only a tenuous grasp of African culture, Bellow would hardly have managed a putative African locale on his own and therefore depended much on these older sources on the Dahomey. The Africa in *Henderson the Rain King* demonstrates what Edward Said calls one of the methods of 'latent Orientalism' – a representation "built upon the prestigious authority of the pioneering scholars [and] travelers […] whose cumulative vision had shaped a quintessential orient." In his chapter entitled "Pilgrims and Pilgrimages, British and French" Said enumerates the nature and consequences of 'borrowing' ideas: "the Orient is less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text […]" (Said 1979, 221, 177). Of course, a novel whose plot takes place in the mid 1950s, well after the French overthrew the historical Dahomey Kingdom in the late 1880s, vitiates any true reflection of West African culture.

The escape Henderson succeeds in undertaking after causing harm to the drought-ridden yet charitable 'Arnewi' tribe – a tribe described approvingly, often through cloying sentimentalism – is fantastically unrealistic. After behaving something like a 'schlemiel,' Henderson famously abandons this tribe after exploding a bomb in the frog-infested water source, thus exacerbating the difficulties of the desperate 'Arnewi'

tribe. This disaster compels him to divagate on a ten-day trek. At this point the turn from a positive to a decidedly negative representation of Africans takes place (excepting the personal charisma and wisdom of King Dahfu). His fictional ten-day trek reflects in essence the journey from East to West Africa, i.e., from cattle tending East Africans to the Dahomey, i.e., roughly from present-day Kenya to Benin which is west of Nigeria (whence most African American ancestors originated). In the novel, the trek ends with Henderson's temporary capture and his narration of the Dahomey tradition of female Amazon warriors as well as barbaric human sacrifices. "Dem no so good people like Arnewi," the obsequious 'Ronilayu,' Henderson's guide portentously says about the menacing 'Wariri' – the historical Dahomey. (*HRK*, 108)

Bellow's depiction of the kind and gentle East-Central African tribe is not historically correct of all the cattle-tending tribes. The Massai of present day Kenya for example were highly feared and often avoided by colonialists from Great Britain and Germany alike. The ambivalence Bellow shows towards Africans (i.e., in his negative depiction of the 'Wariri' in the second half of the novel), is Bellow's selection of those tribes which can affect his spiritual journey most dramatically. It does not appear to be a preference on the part of Bellow of East Africans over West Africans, even though ideologically it may be assumed he connected with his negative portrait of 'Wariri' – the historical Dahomey – with his decidedly negative view of the culture of Black Americans whose origin is located at the western side of the continent at or near the historical location of the Dahomey. Rather, like many people, Bellow had both positive and negative views about blacks, and expressed them in this novel. Slavoj Žižek's notion of the 'social fantasy' stipulate that ideologies can incorporate a great deal of inconsistency and ambivalence without losing their effectiveness. Specifically, Žižek's notion of social fantasy explicates the issue of Bellow's ambivalent depiction of Africans. Žižek emphasizes that ideology operates not only through the construction of knowledge but also through the manipulation of affects and fantasies (Žižek, 126). A critique of the implied ideology Bellow expresses therefore requires a symptomatic reading which exposes the mechanisms of condensation and displacement by which, for example, Bellow's main characters in later novels will often attribute social problems in New York and Chicago to black Americans. Beginning with the second half of *Henderson the Rain King*, Bellow's works trace a coherent, downward trajectory of social dissolution that reflects Bellow's reactionary anxiety over the rapid political and social changes in the United States which had begun in the late 1950s and continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Koy, 155-177).

The Dahomey and the history of the Dahomey have fascinated American scholars of African cultural history and anthropology for two reasons:

> 1) It was the kingdom famous in the nineteenth century for its army of amazons as well as the Dahomey customs or rites of human sacrifices which captivated many European travelers to the region;
> 2) It is the same region where the ancestors of many African Americans who had been enslaved came from.

The prevailing anthropological angle towards the culture of others, as Bellow learned from Herskovits, is disparaged. Henderson insists on judging the African culture he encounters. He incorporates his view of "culture as a system of discriminations and evaluations […] for a particular class in the State [he is] able to identify with" with his judgments (Said 1983, 11) including the human sacrifices to the gods. In the section of the novel in which Henderson views "bodies hanging upside down," executed the previous day, he remarks, "What was one corpse to them? They appeared to deal in them wholesale" (*HRK*, 140). Bellow subsequently projects Herskovits's cultural relativism principles to Henderson's estranged wife and then criticizes them:

> I would have paid four thousand dollars in spot cash for Lily to have been here for one single instant, to see how she would square such things with her idea of goodness […] We had had that terrific argument about reality […] Those who understand it [the rituals] will require no further explanation. It consoled me for my fears to imagine that Lily would be unable to reply (*HRK*, 141).

IV. Evasion of Colonialism in Henderson the Rain King

Bellow's novel set in Africa in the mid 1950s is fundamentally askew when it suppresses or evades the political history and the contemporary changes in Africa in which the colonies located where Henderson travels are contemporaneously engaged in militant efforts to achieve independence from European colonizers. Yet Henderson is not completely impervious to the issues surrounding the colonialization of Africa. This colonial history is alluded to just in passing. For example, 'Wariri' tribesmen possess British

weapons, infantry shoes, and Italian clothes which, in addition to alcohol, had been traded for slaves over a century earlier. Henderson does not source these weapons to the slave trade or the devastating African wars between colonial powers in the 1940s. Rather, Bellow includes a reference to General Charles Gordon's defeat in the Sudan in January, 1885. Aimed at Henderson are dated English guns putatively captured in the siege of Khartoum. Gordon, long one of the most revered military heroes of the English Empire whose backup forces arrived "too late" to save him from being decapitated and having his head put on display in the Sudan (Pakenham, 218-275), is likewise lauded by Henderson as a tragic hero. Henderson regards the manner of Gordon's "African death" positively, as a death reflecting Henderson's own need to escape America: "It was better to die like that than in smelly old England." Bellow relates the situation surrounding Gordon's fate to Henderson's own state of mind: "I feel sympathy for a man like Gordon because he was brave and confused" (*HRK*, 111) just like Henderson.

While in captivity, Henderson observes West African villagers "drunk on Pombo, the native beer" rather than on European alcohol (*HRK*, 139) which historically aided the colonialists to dominate over the Dahomey. In the novel, slavery is referred to only twice; once in the Arab context in East Africa, and once when Henderson feared that he himself might become enslaved (*HRK*, 135). However, no mention of transatlantic slavery or its effects on West Africa appear in this novel. In reading *Henderson the Rain King*, one might well forget that the Gold Coast of West Africa Henderson tours through was still a European colony fifty years ago when the novel was published: Benin still suffered under direct French political, military and economic exploitation. Yet in Bellow's novel, West Africans are portrayed as nigh on free of any European influence (negative or positive), excepting the partially Westernized 'King Dahfu' who had studied medicine at a Beirut university, and who ultimately dies a pathetic death. In this way, Bellow manages to blur chronology and divert attention from African colonialization and exploitation.

For most African scholars, the Dahomey was an embarrassment within the otherwise fascinating history and culture of Africa. Yet unerringly, it is especially this African kingdom that Bellow chose to emphasize in all its mystery and outlandishness. W. E. B. DuBois postulated that the West African slave trade caused the decline of venerated Yoruba culture and the rise of the barbaric Dahomey Kingdom (DuBois, 39), which included the trade of African people for Western guns and alcohol. In contrast, Henderson offers his sublation of other origins for English guns and the alcohol he observes in the hands of the Dahomey-like

'Wariri' tribesmen. The only recounting of acts of violence in Bellow's novel consist in Black violence toward whites or Black violence toward other Blacks, thus replicating the tradition of Orientalist discourse Said elaborates on in *Orientalism*.

In some ways, Bellow's novel has resonances of Conrad's renowned *Lord Jim* (1900), a novel dealing directly with colonialism. With due acknowledgement of the great differences in their agendas and forms of expression, both the Bellow and Conrad novels converge in several culturally symptomatic ways. In both novels a complementary title of nobility is bestowed upon the white protagonists by the dark natives: Conrad has an Indonesian tribe designate their white hero 'Tuan' (Lord) while Bellow has the 'Wariri' in turn denote his American hero as 'Sungo' (Rain King). Like Conrad, Bellow graces the name of his novel with this noble title.

These novels also share a unique transcending of history as well as an escape from guilt on the part of their protagonists. Just as Jim tells Herr Stein that Patusan was his paradise, his place of mystery and escape from previous behavior unworthy of his position, Eugene Henderson likewise describes Africa not merely as an escape – "the world was glad to lose track of me" (*HRK*, 46) – but as reflecting the fulfillment of his primal desires: "[I]t was all simplified and splendid, and I felt I was entering the past – the real past, no history or junk like that […] I have a funny feeling from it. Hell, it looks like the original place. It must be older than the city of Ur." (*HRK*, 46-7) Both Africa and Indonesia get aestheticized as locations of pleasure and are transfigured as places of spiritual liberation. Later in both novels the "paradise" again transforms into a place of terror, hell and death.

V. Orientalist Discourse

Edward Said's study of the Western discipline of the Orient as the obverse of all that is good about the Occident is also regularly elaborated in *Henderson the Rain King* where Bellow subliminally projects the Western desire of Africa – alternatively as both a dreamlike utopia (where wisdom is obtainable) and nightmarish hell (Henderson's potential enslavement, for example). Much of the narrative records erotic fantasies modifying exotic components of a long-gone African culture which are usually affirmed as positive 'savage' behavior, expressed both by Mtalba's connubial wish for Henderson (which ethnologists ridicule given tribal endogamy) and the Amazons portrayed as sexually more alluring (i.e., attributing greater female slenderness, etc.) than the aforementioned study by Richard Burton,

Bellow's outdated source, described them. The exotic contests, executions, and the rituals of rain-making – naked dancing and whipping of the Dahomey Amazons – as reported by British ethnologists and selectively replicated in Bellow's fictional 'Wariri' – certainly make this novel exhilarating reading, yet obfuscate the general reading public through erroneous representations of African culture of the 1950s.

At one point Henderson is surrounded by a score of "naked women, their volupté (only a French word would do the job here) pressed me from all sides […]" (*HRK*, 143). After exhibiting his great physical strength by moving the large Mummah statue, Henderson 'the Sungo,' describes the women "dancing, if you want to call it that. They were bounding and screaming and banging their bodies into me" after Henderson had been completely disrobed. (*HRK*, 188). Later, Henderson is whipped by the Amazon women.

Henderson's reception by Africans replicates the reception of 19th century European explorers. He is told by the magnanimous King Dahfu, "[Y]ou are my first civilized visitor" (*HRK*, 146). In this context of Orientalism Said notes that "every learned traveler in the Orient felt himself to be a representative Westerner who had gotten beneath the film of obscurity" (Said 1979, 223). Yet Bellow goes somewhat further than Said states, for he manages to have his American hero in Africa get this sense of being a representative Westerner projected onto him by the partially Westernized African or 'Wariri' chief. As Daniel LaMont points out, Bellow oversimplifies the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, thus implicating himself in the colonial discourse (LaMont, 129-149).

Bellow's racial pigeonholing of characters in his novels is of course not limited to the black characters. Sander L. Gilman astutely observes Bellow's non-Jewish physical description of Eugene Henderson to be characteristics of racial stereotypes: "Henderson is clearly not Jewish. Indeed, Bellow selects for him an "Aryan" physiognomy that seems to be based on some idealized image of "Nordic man" taken from fascist ideology" (Gilman, 370).

In an interview with the *Paris Review* in 1966, Saul Bellow related the reception of this novel by his former anthropology professor, Melville Herskovits in a flippant way:

> Years ago I studied ethnology with the late Professor Herskovits. Later, he scolded me for writing a book like Henderson. He said the subject was too serious for such fooling. I felt that my fooling was fairly serious. (Harper, 189)

Of course, if such an answer is not meant to be facetious – – if it is not a Bellovian jibe – – its reliability depends on the relationship the author and audience has with the focus of the novel. One assumes Saul Bellow would categorically discourage an analogous statement from a non-Jew "fooling" with a topic as serious as the Jewish holocaust, in part by omitting essential issues of history as the quipster narrator manages to do in *Henderson the Rain King*. I maintain this supposition on the basis of an angry letter Bellow wrote in 1956 to William Faulkner after Faulkner championed the poet Ezra Pound, infamous for his anti-Semitism. For Herskovits, *Henderson the Rain King* was foolish for its false anthropology. The history of colonization, exploitation, enslavement and genocide in Africa relegated Bellow's comic stereotypes to discomforting representations of the Africans and compelled Herskovits to scold his former student. An argument may be made that as a novelist, Bellow can represent Africans as he wishes in his fiction. Yet a theoretical account put forward by post-structural literary critics points to new approaches to literary interpretation which, although predating Herskovits, links his interest in culture and literary representation. As a cultural entity, literature results from a number of forces, and the text is where the struggle among these forces takes place. Martin Procházka notes that

> […] the underlying problems of the recent transformation of literary into cultural studies are generated by the conflict between the Foucauldian notion of the text as material in which discourse is productive of practice and the traditional notion of the literary work of art as a self-contained "aesthetic object" whose intrinsic value makes its text subject to critical analysis and interpretive commentary.
>
> (Procházka, 179)

Unquestionably, Bellow's novel has a tragicomic essence, and delves into the spiritual fate of Eisenhower's America, via the character Henderson, and this issue makes up one of its 'intrinsic values.' Preponderate is Henderson's attempt by means of this daring African trek to discover himself spiritually. Nevertheless, *Henderson the Rain King* features a discourse which is 'productive of practice' with its African setting in a period of violent colonial overthrow. Eleni Coundouriotis persuasively argues that "to a European audience Africa did not have a history" (Coundouriotis, 11). Given his silence about European enslavement of Africans or even colonialism in a novel depicting Africa in the 1950s, Bellow's judgment of his own flawed representation of the

African culture resembles 'colonial justice' and is therefore a particularly fascinating American form of 'Orientalist discourse,' fascinating especially because in the main Edward Said emphasized the French and English artists, intellectuals and writers in *Orientalism* and wrote rather little about the Americans.

VI. Conclusion

In an early study of Bellow's literary achievement, Irving Malin perceptively points out how Bellow's novels

> give us "caricature" – the minor characters are "sports" – we laugh at them as we do at cartoons. The major characters are also sports, but we get to know them so well that we cannot simply laugh at their appearances, gestures, or voices. We often feel sorry for them […] They are fools – stupid, grotesque, but a bit sad. (Malin, 132)

Bellow's caricatures of Africans, I would argue, are more appropriately characterized as stereotypes which indicate a development away from his anthropological studies under Herskovits in the 1930s. In his sundry representation of African barbaric executions and sexual exoticism, aided by outdated anthropological studies and further embellished, Bellow accentuates the eroticism and the exoticism of the African culture to enliven the spiritual quest Henderson undertakes. Homi Bhabha maintains that the stereotype is "a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive" (Bhabha, 70). He not only judges his allochronic, selective and reductive representations of African culture without referencing the African voice authentically, but one decade later Bellow does likewise with African Americans, representing black people in order to help him define an alleged American moral decline. Near the beginning of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Artur Sammler, a Jewish holocaust survivor newly immigrated to New York City, tries in vain to alert the metropolitan police about an intimidating black pickpocket on the city bus he was riding. Within the narration, a fleeting reference is made to Africa:

> Of course the phone was smashed. Most outdoor telephones were smashed, crippled. They were urinals also. New York was getting worse than Naples or Salonika. It was like an

> Asian, an African town, from this standpoint […] straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of color erupting from beneath. (Bellow 1969, 10).

Not surprisingly, in contrasting the distressing position of Sammler's adopted American metropolis with cities of other continents, Bellow has Sammler assume the ability to "judge" cultures he has neither seen nor experienced first-hand. In expressing his revulsion and disgust of a New York telephone booth, he acrimoniously relegates Africa and Asia to the lowest position in civilization, expressing both his delusions of Asian and African inferiority and superiority of white Eurocentric America.

In Bellow's nonfiction such as his travel memoir *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976) and the essay collection *It All Adds Up* (1994) as well as some choice interviews, Bellow intermittently expresses a view of the superiority of the white race. As he infelicitously responded in a 1988 *New Yorker* interview to a question about U.S. minority and 'third world' writers and the value of their literary output, "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be glad to read him" (Atlas, 534). The sententiousness of these rhetorical questions resemble Thomas Babington Macaulay's peremptory line which Edward Said cites early in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*: "[…] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Said, 12). Reflecting the position of most American critics, James Atlas writes, "read from today's vantage, informed by multiculturalism, *Henderson the Rain King* is racist in the extreme" (Atlas, 273).

To be sure, *Henderson the Rain King* is one of a few substantive novels in the post WWII period in American literature dealing with many significant spiritual issues which spoke to the intrepid American reader of the materialistic Eisenhower era effectively. An audacious semi-picaresque novel, it is certainly more than merely false representations of Africans. However, in reading this novel fifty years after its initial publication, Bellow's representations are unmistakably reductive, long elapsed and unpropitious, and, as with most of his other novels, Bellow's protagonist serves as a vehicle for his own polemical views illustrative of, among other things, Orientalist discourse.

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