

# Black Orpheus<sup>1</sup>

## Black Internationalism in a Time of Blackness

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### Abstract

Although it's only been thirty years since the Berlin Wall was torn down, the term "Cold War" has become something of an antique. It is as if when Ronald Reagan pronounced those fateful words, "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall", the wheels of history suddenly and irrevocably came to a standstill. The USA vs USSR nuclear, technology, space and innovation war came to an abrupt and unceremonious end. That at least, is one of the reasons for the global amnesia about what the Cold War actually meant and the ways in which it altered our consciousness and the world. Africa, is not even considered when "Cold War Studies" are mentioned. As a continent, we are absented from the volatile and deadly politics of that fateful period from 1945 to 1989. As many have pointed out, contrary to the popular perception that Africa was untouched by Cold War politics, the period was actually one of "hot wars" all over the continent. Whereas in North America, citizens of the United States could breathe a sigh of relief that they no longer would stand accused of "un-American activities", on the African continent the ideological fallout of the end of the Cold War still continues. The fate of African Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Negritude and Black Internationalism was also bundled up with Cold

War politics and this has in some ways resulted in the conclusion that the thawing of American and Soviet Union also led to the depreciation of these liberation and anti-colonial ideas. This aftermath has bred a certain type of continental fatalism in which all our dead, dying and barely alive utopias are inevitably read from the vantage point of Cold War politics and after. It is therefore timely that we excavate the archives of anti-colonial art and literary movements and journals whose sole impetus for existence was to ensure that the ideals of African Nationalism and Pan-Africanism would be realised in the world of cultural production. This excavation consists of many moving parts since it is at once an intellectual history of art and a social history of "little magazines". Equally important is the history of literary magazines that attempted to "modernise" and "localise" literature and thereby offer to the newly independent citizens of the continent avenues to express their "coming to consciousness" in the aftermath of colonial domination. This paper will attempt to use the concept of the "Black Orpheus" to imagine an intellectual history of art and art production through the lens of other concepts that lie in ruin — Black Internationalism, Pan-Africanism, African Nationalism etc.

'MR. SMITH FOSSES, the middle gentleman in the photograph on the opposite page, 634, is a resident of Kimberly [sic], South Africa. Mr. Fosses is of pure African descent and was born at Burgesdorp. He is a baker by trade, and a self-educated and self-made man. Kimberly [sic], where Mr. Fosses resides, will be remembered by our readers as conspicuous in the English-Boer war. The great South African Diamond Fields are situated there; and the population is about 45,000 nearly two-thirds of which are colored and the greater part of these are employed in the mines at 85 cents per day.' (Anon. 1904: 635)

The biography of Mr. Smith Fosses that was published in *The Colored American Magazine*<sup>2</sup> in 1904 is what a biography should be – it gives us a sense of place, time, local colour and above all, it is an illuminating sketch of a man who wasn't reticent in his description of himself as a 'self-educated and self-made man' (Anon. 1904: 635). Although there are many high points in this profile, for now it is important that we begin with the description of Mr. Fosses as 'of pure African descent' and the fact that his biographical sketch was accompanied by a photograph which it is fair to assume was taken in Burgesdorp, Kimberley, where Mr. Fosses lived. If his biography had simply been textual – without an accompanying photograph – then the mind would have wandered. What would a man of 'pure African descent' have looked like in 1904 and why did he feel that he had to state that ethnic/racial descriptor? Once we look at the photograph, we can apply our own training and prejudices to decide whether Mr. Fosses fits into that category of being of 'pure African descent'. This article is, however, not about our eyes and our prejudices and our training; it is about Mr. Fosses and many like him who took pride in being of 'pure African descent,' and who made such declarations on the pages of newspapers and magazines across the black and African diasporas. This article will attempt to understand the role played by magazines such as *The Colored American Magazine* in the construction and maintenance of two traditions – firstly, the black mission tradition of artisanal self-sufficiency, and secondly, the black radical movement defined as 'Ethiopianism'. The main thrust of the paper will be that both these traditions were underpinned by what has been called 'black internationalism'. Mr. Fosses, from this viewpoint,

was a man of colour of his time; he didn't just believe that across the Atlantic there were men and women like him who were 'self-made'; he also believed that these other readers, also of 'African descent', would recognise in his face, posture, pride, language and repose their own faces and fates. His statements are about bridging the gap that time, slavery, colonialism, and distance had placed between himself and these other people of colour. But it should be obvious that his sensibility had also been shaped by the presence of the newspaper/magazine. Without it, he would have had no publics to address and no communities within which to imagine what being of 'African descent' actually meant. Mr. Fosses, as shall be demonstrated, was more than a 'self-made man'. He was a word-made man; his world was shaped by the history of black letters and black writing in South Africa.

*The Colored American Magazine* came into existence and was published from 1900 to 1909. As can be discerned from the illustration on the cover of the October 1904 edition, the term 'Colored' already had a broad meaning. We can therefore infer that Mr. Fosses and other black residents of Burgesdorp probably read *The Colored American Magazine*, not just because it addressed them in its name, but because they were already familiar with the elasticity and pliability of the term 'Colored'. It is probable that Fosses and his associates did not just read one publication, but that they read many other publications that were concerned with 'race pride'. In these publications, they would have learnt that a 'race man' or 'race woman' wasn't just someone who was aware of their racial belonging – being of 'pure African descent' is just one example – but that a 'race man' or 'race woman' was someone who conscientiously worked for 'racial uplift'. The latter term is embodied in Mr. Smith Fosses' list of what his Burgesdorp community had achieved. There is a sense in which enumeration and accounting were part of this identity of being an 'Ethiopian'. In the brief sketch of life in Kimberley, the author of the short article repeated what would have been Mr. Smith Fosses' list of his community's successes. The author wrote:

'Mr. Fosses gives a detailed account of affairs in Africa which is extremely interesting. Kimberley sustains 12 colored churches, 12 schools, 6 coffee shops, 5 tailor shops, 8 grocery shops and general dealers, 11 shoemakers, 1 saddler shop,

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2 bakeries, 7 butcher shops, 9 fruit dealers, 2 secret societies, 2 political organizations, 1 brass band and about 25 letter carriers. The A. M. E. Church, or Ethiopian movement as it is called, is in a highly prosperous condition and has the confidence and support of the native population.’ (Anon. 1904: 635).

Schools, businesses, churches, and artisans’ workshops defined the achievement of these communities of colour, and therefore defined what it meant to be a person of ‘pure African descent’. But, these points of self-congratulation and the language in which to express this race pride predate the establishment of newspapers and magazines. In a haunting eulogy to Adam Kok III, a mourner at his funeral uttered these words:

‘After him, there will be no coloured king or chief in Colonial South Africa... of coloured chiefs he is the last. Take a good look into that grave. You will never look into the grave of another chief of our race.’ (Company, 1906: 638)

Thus, even before Mr. Smith Fosses’ time, being ‘black’ and being of ‘African descent’ meant more than just skin colour; it was a lifestyle, a communally-shared sense of accomplishment and a modern appraisal of what it meant to be ‘black in the world’. The latter point about ‘modernity’ requires some emphasis since it is often assumed that ‘blackness’ or ‘Africanity’ is a product of colonialism/imperialism;

this is only partially true. In the case of South Africa’s people of colour, ‘blackness’ emerged on the margins of the colonial and imperial frontiers where people of colour congregated on mission stations from which they constructed multi-ethnic and multi-racial identities that were at once a reflection of the colonial condition but also its refutation, since so many of them often transcended the limitations placed on them by colonial racism. It is this dual contestation between ‘submission’ and ‘resistance’ that weaved itself into Mr. Smith Fosses’ biography. It informed the deliberate and precise manner in which he informed his American readers that he was of ‘pure African descent’ while also informing them that he was an erudite ‘Ethiopian’ who was a card-carrying member of a political organisation dedicated to the autonomy and success of people of colour. His political identification is only hinted at, and for good reasons, since colonial discourse had already marked ‘Ethiopianism’ as a dangerous and subversive ideology and so Fosses was cleverly revealing his allegiances without directly asserting his ideological bent.

There is an uncanny resemblance between the manner in which a ‘coloured’ reader of an American magazine understood himself as an African and the way in which African-Americans also accounted for their modernity and contribution to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the opening pages of his book, *We Were Eight Years in Power* (2017), Ta-Nehisi Coates cites the example of a Reconstruction Era (1865–77) African-American politician who responded to the resurgence of white supremacy by pointing to the achievements of black government. The statement by Thomas Miller, an African-American Congressman from South Carolina, enumerates the sense of accomplishment that Mr. Smith Fosses also seemed to want to convey to his American supporters. Miller is quoted as saying:

‘We were eight years in power. We had built schoolhouses, established charitable institutions, built and maintained the penitentiary system, provided for the education of the deaf and dumb, rebuilt the ferries. In short, we had reconstructed the State and placed it upon the road to prosperity.’ (Coates, 2017: xiii)

In citing this optimism of the Reconstruction Era, Coates makes the argument that what white supremacists hate more than 'violent black recklessness' is 'Good Negro Government' (2017: xv). As with Mr. Fosses' explicit naming of 'Ethiopianism', Coates makes the observation that it is only when black people run their own affairs, and do so elegantly and laudably, that white supremacy raises the spectre of 'black domination'. In the case of South Africa, these forms of 'black' autonomy existed on mission stations and in the communities that were formed by the descendants of black/African people who had lived on mission stations. Although this may imply a religious foundation of black autonomy, that is not the only possible conclusion. Although Congressman Miller's retrospective appraisal of American Reconstruction could be read as nostalgic and resigned, it is equally possible to read his statements as a precursor to Mr. Smith Fosses' own version of 'black modernism' – the insertion of black people into narratives of progress and upward mobility. Although such ideals may seem to have been inspired by Christian progressivism, that does not seem to have been the only reason. Fosses was a descendant – it can be argued – of men and women who had imagined themselves into a modernist narrative of history via the newspaper and via literacy. The idea that Africa and people of African descent were not outside of history but at its very centre is one of the main reasons for identifying this with the term 'Black Orpheus'.

In the context of the current preponderance of ideas of the black self as a subject of abject and optic fear, of what relevance and value is Mr. Fosses' portrait and biography? In its dignity and intentionality, the photograph of Mr. Fosses and his assistants evokes the work of the German photographer August Sander (1876–1964). The deliberate composition that showcases him as a man at work and in business would have fitted well in Sander's series, which was originally titled 'People of the Twentieth Century'. This comparison is, however, only superficial, since Sander's work only began in 1910 and Mr. Fosses' photograph appeared in *The Colored American Magazine* in 1904. This means that Mr. Fosses had other reference points and other images in mind when he posed for the picture; he was not imitating Sander. Compositionally, he was continuing with the visual traditions and styles that were already in the magazine. He was presenting himself in a way that he had seen other black subjects

present themselves. Or, at least, he understood how important it was for him to foreground his profession as a baker and to do so with visual cues. Historically, Mr. Fosses identified with the 'Ethiopian' movement, which in South Africa can be dated as far back as 1884 when Nehemiah Tile founded the Tembu Church. Although there are controversies and debates about whether there was a direct link between the rise of Ethiopianism and the emergence of African Nationalism, in Fosses' biography, politics and religion are indistinguishably mixed since his mention of the A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal Church) preceded his description of the political movement to which we can assume he was also a member. The fact that religious affiliation seamlessly glides into politics in his biography implies that, to Mr. Fosses, the appellation 'Ethiopian' was not metaphoric but was an expression of his position in Burgesdorp's 'coloured' population. His attachment to Ethiopianism cannot be attributed solely to his reading of the biblical passage, 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand unto God' (Psalm 68: 31), but has to be explored as an embodied concept which Mr. Fosses summarised in his description of himself as of 'pure African descent'. Although it is not directly relevant to *The Colored American Magazine*, Mr. Fosses' identity as an Ethiopian is a harbinger of what took place in black and African newspapers and magazines in 1936 after the Italians invaded the kingdom of Ethiopia in October of 1935. Our reading of Mr. Fosses' photograph should therefore consider the fact that there was a before and after of his adherence to Ethiopianism; he was positioned between historical epochs which make it possible for us to understand that his identification with this independence movement was not just a flourish of the pen, but a credible and historically verifiable commitment of his self and his identity. By submitting his contribution to *The Colored American Magazine*, Mr. Fosses was also indicating that he was a well-read man, he was a literary man. By choosing *The Colored American Magazine*, he was also expressing what Jane Nardal called 'black internationalism' – 'Blacks of all origins, of different nationalities, mores, and religions vaguely feel that in spite of everything they belong to one and the same race' (2002: 105).

Black internationalism is not just the name of an ideology; as a type of consciousness, it functions to name a circulation of ideas about blackness around the world. By submitting his image and his story,

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Mr. Fosses was essentially placing himself in this circumnavigation that at the time didn't have a definitive destination or outcome. He was, as with other men and women in his position, submitting his thoughts, his ideas, his achievements, his bodily presence to the judgement of history. He didn't need a soapbox on which to stand and make his presence known; the newspapers and magazines of his era made this possible. To be of ‘pure African descent’ didn't mean certainty and ethnic chauvinism; instead, what Mr. Fosses was indexing with his self-chosen descriptor was his challenge to the white supremacists who would have made his skin colour and his phenotype a product of ‘exotic’ race mixing. By choosing to identify as an African, Mr. Fosses was revealing the already porous and expandable contours of identity in pre-apartheid South Africa. He was, we could argue, pre-empting the narrowing of the word ‘Coloured’ by the apartheid state. Alternatively, we could say that in the short space that Mr. Fosses was given by *The Colored American Magazine*, he made a cultural statement about the difference between skin colour and culture; phenotype and presence; genes and accomplishments. His consciousness of himself as a self-made man of ‘pure African descent’ should therefore be read as a cultural rather than an ethnic statement.

If membership in the Ethiopian movement is not evidence enough for the kinds of political commitments that were important to a man of ‘pure African descent’, then the closing paragraph on Mr.

Fosses offers the reader undeniable proof of the political intent of his submission to the magazine: ‘The African Political movement has a membership of 3,000. They recently established a National fund of £ 1,000,000 to be used in the purchase of real estate in good localities for the erection of industrial schools’ (Anon. 1904: 635).

Although there is no need to specify which political party Mr. Fosses belonged to, the article names the ‘African Political movement’ as the party that had raised money for the building of industrial schools. It is likely that Mr. Fosses’ biography is referring to the African Political Organisation founded in 1902 in Cape Town. This organisation later became the African People’s Organisation (APO) and is historically associated with the figure of Abdullah Abdurahman, who was the first person of colour to be elected as a city councillor in Cape Town. Thus, although Mr. Fosses does not give many details about which ‘African Political movement’ he was a member of, he is likely referring to this organisation. The importance of his allegiance is that not only does it reveal one of many precursors to the African National Congress and its allies, it also reinforces the idea that Mr. Fosses was not just a baker but that he was an embodiment of black selfhood since he identified with so many of the century’s central ideas of black thought, from Ethiopianism to Black internationalism to Pan-Africanism. He was, to use the slogan of the Pan-Africanist movement, a true ‘son of the soil’. His awareness of the multiple ways that a black body could be pledged to politics, even while he seemed to be merely reporting on the successes of his community in managing its own affairs, reveals his knowledge of the genre of ‘racial uplift’ that he was contributing to. His biographical sketch was written for an audience that was conversant in the politics of blackness of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; his was a succinct declaration of what a self-made man of ‘pure African descent’ could do, not just with his learning, but with his inculcation of black internationalist ideas.

Imagining a world beyond his immediate political and social circumstances is perhaps Mr. Fosses’ most visible contribution. In an abbreviated and pointed biographical sketch, the joint labour of *The Colored American Magazine*’s editors and Mr. Fosses’ pen conjoin to present to a global black audience a

snippet of life in Burgesdorp, Kimberley. The seeming innocence of Mr. Fosses' submission, however, belies a thorough imbrication in a world of black letters and black ideas. If Mr. Fosses had only been interested in advertising his career as an artisan, then the sketch would have still succeeded as a direct and visible index of his profession. However, it is the fact that Mr. Fosses moves beyond the register of professional self-representation and into the language of racial betterment that one truly comprehends his choice of words in describing himself as being of 'pure African descent'. This construction of black selfhood depended on more than just his skin colour; it depended on the enumeration of the achievements of the 'race'. Mr. Fosses was not content to let the image of himself flanked by his two assistants 'speak for itself'; he wanted to make sure that his words, his thoughts, and his pride also appeared in narrative form. His abbreviated biography matter-of-factly expressed the history of newspaper and magazine conventions that had defined the black world and given many black writers and authors access to a public they would otherwise have never reached from their localities.

## Notes

1. This is a reference to the literary journal *Black Orpheus*, which was established in Nigeria in 1957 by Ulli Beier. For a review of the type of content published in the journal see Irele (1965).
2. *The Colored American Magazine* and *The Colored American* newspaper are separate publications with distinct histories. For the history of the latter newspaper, see the *Library of Congress* entry, 'The Colored American (Washington, D.C.) 1893-19??' (Washington, DC), Jan. 1 1893. [online] Available at: [www.loc.gov/item/sn83027091/](http://www.loc.gov/item/sn83027091/).

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