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**Third Text: Modernism, Negritude, and the
Critique of Ethnicity**

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***Third Text*: Modernism, Negritude, and the Critique of Ethnicity**

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I would first like to declare my vested interest in *Third Text*: I've contributed to the journal since its first issue in 1987, I sit on its advisory board, and I'm a long standing friend of Rasheed Araeen, its founder. So, whatever, criticisms I might make of the journal – or have made in the past – certainly do not outweigh my continuing support, of what is one of the most important journals produced in Britain over the last 30 years. Indeed, its continuity is remarkable.

The origins of *Third Text* lie in the rich and explosive resistance to racism, colonialism and imperialism between the early 1970s and mid-1980s in Britain, a period in which the struggles of Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian workers who arrived as immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s, had begun to reshape the British state's national and domestic response to decolonization and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Their struggles against racism at work, and for equal pay and union recognition (as in the extraordinary strike for union recognition led by Indian women workers at the photo-processing plant Grunwick in London in 1976-77) shifted the political self-perception of the British state and the politicians that had brought these workers to Britain: namely, that black immigrants were here to stay. More pointedly though, they were here to stay and contribute far more than their poorly paid labour power; for the immigrants not only brought with them their own native cultures, allegiances and histories, but also their own cultural ambitions. However, the British state may have welcomed and tolerated the marginal and largely private manifestations of these indigenous cultures when they had the air of exotic imports, but it didn't know how to deal with manifestations of public assertiveness once black workers began to realise their collective independence. Indeed, it was in the early 1970s at the highpoint of a racist backlash against the resistance by black immigrants to their silent integration, that defined a seismic shift in post-war British culture: that British culture – the host culture, so to speak - could no longer disguise the fact that it was *itself* a part of the process of decolonization; the multi-glottal had invaded the mono-cultural citadel. Consequently it was at this point, that the various cultural organs of the British state, in order to defuse the worst effects of a chronic institutional racism and race-blindness, began to promulgate the notions 'multiculturalism' and 'ethnic' arts. Multiculturalism and ethnic arts, in their original forms,

at least, were seen as a way of integrating native immigrant cultures into public life, along pathways of separate development. That is, they were formulated primarily to protect immigrant cultures from their newly imposed alien host culture, by giving assent to their traditional and pre-modern aspects, encouraging artists, as a result, to identify with their ethnicity above all else. As such what was seen as an act of benign and progressive grace, was actually a continuation of racial difference by other means: immigrant cultures were held to be at the most authentic when they were attached to their traditional forms and patterns of allegiance.

It was at this point, that Araeen, was to enter the debate. Having arrived in Britain from Karachi in 1964, to continue make a career for himself as an artist, he soon came up against, initially the overt racism of the host culture, but also the beginnings of multiculturalism and the fetishization of ethnicity, which either wanted to push him into the category of ethnic arts, or subtly or blatantly denigrated him as a failed modernist. In the mid-1970s, then, there was a clear ideological struggle for newly arrived and long-standing immigrant artists of ambition: to confront the categories and working practices of 'ethnic' arts head on, in order to define the artistic ambitions of black artists within the extra-artistic struggle for equality and internationalism. In 1978 Araeen, set up the forerunner of *Third Text*, *Black Phoenix*, precisely in order to do this, publishing in the first issue what was to be the first radical manifesto of black liberation and art practice since the beginnings of the black liberation movement in the States in the mid-1960s and the debates on modernism and negritude in the 1930s. The new black artist, and black artist of the recent past, "contributes to contemporary development in their own right, by their own original ideas, concepts and synthesis/antithesis; and more importantly, they offer a challenge to Western domination by defying the hegemony of art styles perpetuated and promoted internationally by the *transatlantic* gallery circuit of the Western world."¹ It was soon republished in *Studio International*.

In this respect Araeen's writing during this period acts as hinge between two sets of struggles and generations, and the emergence of a younger generation of black artists, writers and activists in Britain, that will form the critical constituency of *Third Text*: the

¹ Rasheed Aareen, 'Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto' *Black Phoenix*, No 1 January 1978, republished in *Making Myself Visible*, introduction Guy Brett, Kala Press, London, 1984, p82

post-colonial diaspora of intellectuals and artists from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, newly arrived in the 1950s and 60s, that would form the intellectual framework of cultural resistance for the first generation immigrants (such as A.Sivanandan and his journal, *Race and Class*, the Black Workers Movement, Artists for Democracy, Stuart Hall, editor, from 1959-1961, of the *New Left Review*) and behind that, the great modernist legacy of black liberation and resistance (Langston Hughes, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and Paulo Freire). *Third Text* arrives, therefore, at the point, where Araeen and others' mediation of these legacies are finding a tentative hold in the emergence of a new generation of black British writers and artists in the British art school system, such as Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce. In the spirit of Araeen this generation, demand the recognition of their autonomy as artists, and their collective contribution to definitions of the modern, without any kind of fealty to ethnicity. Yet, initially there was residual tension between this emergent bloc and Araeen's project, around the status of black nationalism in art in Britain, particular given the fact that outside of the academy black nationalism in Britain was one of the few popular sources of radicalization for young black people, with its overlaps with Rastafarianism and the Nation of Islam.

Chambers and Piper, as children of first generation Caribbean immigrants, were as such closer to the American writer Frank Kofsky's black nationalist reading of black modernism, in his writings on American jazz²: it was the job of the black artist to forge a singular 'black language', a negritude *écriture* from the bounds of racism. Despite Araeen's sympathy for a defence of indigenous practices as a way of defining a space free from overt racism and the colonial legacy, this smacked too much of race essentialism, and *Third Text* in the first issues began to address this question in depth. As such, by the late 1980s *Third Text*, became the primary site of debate on race, representation and culture, in an extraordinary outpouring of critical and theoretical creativity within this newly emergent second-generation modernist – and then latterly postmodernist – formation.

Thus in an important sense *Third Text*, as the product of post-colonial and post-Empire Britain, is one of the forerunners, then, critical under-labourer, for the massive global transformation in art production and art theory in the 1980s and 1990s, as the flourishing

² Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1970

of post-colonial modes of thinking becomes identifiable with the crisis of modernism itself – or a particular post-war US-centric reading of modernism. The immanent race-blindness and gender-blindness of post-war US modernism, becomes the fulcrum for the development of a wide range of theoretical deconstructions and historical reconstructions that will, of course, eventually lead to the formation of critical postmodernism. But if US postmodernism is quick to develop a critique of Eurocentrism, and then latterly, a theory of the postcolonial subject and black and immigrant modernist subject as a hybrid construction – lying between ‘blackness’ and white European culture, nativism and modernism - the condition of the new culture and its theoretical problems are rarely addressed with such consistency and from within a genuinely global framework as in *Third Text*. Indeed, as postmodernism declines in the 1990s as a post-colonial formation within the US and British academy, the discussion of Eurocentrism, race and imperialism drops out the picture, falling back into ‘race studies’ or moving into a post-colonial adaptation of cultural studies.

Thus, in the face of these retreats and omissions, *Third Text* continues to be one of the few cultural journals that continues to operate consistently within a global, anti-imperialist, post-colonial framework, drawing on new theoretical thinking in response to the changing demands of immigrant modernist, and native modernist cultural practices from around the globe in a period of mass immigrations (and racist immigration policy). In this respect, by the early 1990s, the journal had become preoccupied with - in addition to its foundational work on ethnicity and multiculturalism - two new major issues: the limits of post-colonial critique in a world of expanded migrations and rebarbative nationalisms, and the hyper-internationalization of art and growth of advanced practice globally, the latter partly being the result of internationalization of artistic production, but also a consequence of the expansion of the Biennale circuit under the rise of neoliberalism. Hence, from a position of British, native introversion in the late 1980s, dominated by the editors’ complaints about British provincialism and essentialism, by the late 1990s the journal had become a significant international forum for the analysis and critique of the new circuits of advanced post-colonial and non-Western practice. This reflected a widening cohort of contributors and an expanded readership. A few titles of *Third Text* Special Issues over the last 10 years, give a sense of these changes: ‘Post-Soviet Russia’, edited by Victor Tupitsyn (No 65, 2003), ‘Palestine & Israel’, edited by Haim Bresheeth and Haifa Hammami, (No 80-81, 2006), ‘Fortress Europe’, edited by

Yosefa Loshitzky, (No 83, 2006), 'Turkey: The Space of the Min(d) Field', edited by Gülsen Bal, (No 90, 2008) 'Picturing 'Gypsies': Interdisciplinary Approaches to Roma Representation', edited by Paloma Gay y Blasco and Dina Jordanova (No 92, 2008), 'Socialist Eastern Europe', edited by Reuben Fowkes (96 2009), 'Cinema in Muslim Countries', edited by Ali Nobil Ahmad (No 102, 2010) 'Beyond Negritude: Senghor's Vision for Africa', edited by Denis Ekpo, (No 103, 2010) 'The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography', edited by Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray (No 108, 2011).

The richness of these subjects is self-evident, and shows the intellectual resources the magazine can now call on to orchestrate its analyses and critique of 'business as usual'. But what is of particular significance in this brief list for the magazine in the period of its post-post-colonial expansion is the issue on Negritude. The failure of negritude as a cultural policy in various post-independence states in Africa and beyond is well documented; its metaphysics of 'black soul' and 'black identity' are part of the egregious essentialism, that has derailed the ambitions of black artists and black resistance; and indeed a critique of one of its leading ideologues Léopold Sédar Senghor (the president of Senegal from 1960-1980 [1906-2001]) forms part of the special issue (although Senghor was in no sense a black nationalist; the post-independent states, he argued, should not turn their back on Europe). So, clearly in lieu of *Third Text's* foundational work on 'ethnicity' and essentialism the legacy of negritude is something that the magazine should be especially critical of. But negritude as the name – or strategy - for that which refuses to be assimilated by a newly hegemonic post-colonial modernity, is another matter. As Araeen argues in his introduction to the issue, negritude is also, prior to its conservative and defensive racialist appropriation, "the historical necessity to recognise the specificity of a culture's own ground from which to speak."³ In other words negritude is another name for cultural autonomy, and as such marshals another possible dynamic within the multicultural zones and strictures of post-colonialism: the *mutual liberation* of the colonizer and colonized, through the shared participation of Western and non-Western cultures in an expanded and emancipatory universality. Hence the struggle is not for multicultural parity but for cultural interdependence without pre-conceptions. This I believe, is now at the heart of *Third Text's* theoretical project and as such returns

³ Rasheed Araeen, 'Preface: Why Beyond Negritude?', 'Beyond Negritude: Senghor's Vision for Africa, Special Issue, edited by Denis Ekpo, *Third Text*, No 103, Vol 24, Issue, 2, March 2010, p172

the debate to the very heart of the colonial experience and imperialism: the *making* of blackness.

Under colonialism and imperialism native peoples *became* black, insofar as skin colour became the mark of a defining and visible mark of inferiority and otherness, what Domenico Losurdo has recently called the absolute racial delimitation of democracy and community.⁴ And, indeed, in spite of anti-racist struggle and post-colonial liberation, the peoples of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and the peoples of the Americas, Australia and the Pacific, *remain* black. One of the struggles then for first-generation immigrant and second-generation artists and intellectuals in Britain, was to define and defend blackness, whilst resisting a given or received black identity, insofar as if blackness was a fiction, it was a necessary fiction. This was very much part of what A.Sivanandan described in the 1970s as the cultural schizophrenia of the post-colonial immigrant worker and artist, the 'creature of two worlds', as he called it, struggling to find a place and voice - certainly for the sons and daughters of first generation immigrants – in a culture both alien and homely. Today, though, the fiction of blackness faces another struggle: the disappearance of the black or coloured artist into the global artistic diaspora. Hence Araeen and *Third Text's*, current interest in a modernized and retooled negritude: negritude is that space, where the fiction of blackness and race, contributes to the possibility of post-Western universality in the name of globalizing and post-capitalist modernity (and not the globalization of multiculturalisms in the name of an enlightened Western modernity – the old liberal story). This is a powerful utopian vision, and as such, it draws on Sivanandan's fundamental critique of the descent of post-80s multiculturalism into an 'enclave' mentality. But perhaps more pointedly, it reveals the historical stakes of *Third Text*. The journal seems increasingly less attached to anything resembling a First World art journal monitoring what appears to be a bewildering global scene, but rather, an unfolding place of attachment to new world of values, a place for old new worlds and new old worlds; in this, its persistence, vision and creativity is quite remarkable.

Finally, a few facts and acknowledgements: *Third Text* is published by Taylor & Francis, as part of the Routledge Journals roster; Araeen, in his seventies, has largely taken a back seat on day to day editorial matters, and the journal now is edited by Richard

⁴ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, Verso, London and New York, 2011

Appignanesi, Richard Dyer and Zoë Peterson, who have had an important say in the outwardfacing and globalizing character of the journal. In this light the journal also publishes editions in Spanish (*Tercer Texto*) and Turkish and two English language versions out of Cape Town (*Third Text Africa*) and Karachi (*Third Text Asia*), which focus on Africa and Asia respectively. The journal also supports a subsidiary publishing house, Third Text publications. Recent publications include: Rasheed Araeen, *Art Beyond Art: Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the 21st Century* (2010), and *Beyond Cultural Diversity: The Case for Cultural Creativity* (2010) A Third Text report, compiled and edited by Richard Appignanesi. Third Text Africa, and Tercer Texto are also accessible free on-line. The Spanish address is: www.tercertexto.org/.