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CHAPTER 6

FROM HARLEM TO ALGIERS

TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITIES BETWEEN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT AND ALGERIA, 1962–1978

SAMIR MEGHELLI

Consciousness of Africa mounted again as more and more African nations regained their independence. The inhuman atrocities of the French colonialists against the Algerian people, who were struggling valiantly for their independence, aroused widespread sympathy and fraternal support among the people of Harlem.¹

—Richard B. Moore, "Africa Conscious Harlem"

We saw Algeria in terms of our pasts and what our futures might be. I saw, see, and am feeling it that way now. And what I write is an attempt to make that experience more available to me, to you, to us.²

—Michele Russell, one of the many young African Americans who attended the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria

IN 1959, AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL AND ACTIVIST HOYT FULLER MADE a brief stopover in Algeria on his way to visit the newly independent African republic of Guinea. In an excerpt from a journal of his experiences, he recounts, "Algeria was an armed camp, with the French colonial masters firmly in control. Soldiers and gendarmes were everywhere, arms at the ready, and many of the public buildings were 'protected' from guerilla assault by layers of barbed wire." He continues, "I had entered the city from the liner, *Foch*, with two young Africans, one from Abidjan, the other from Brazzaville, and we had moved about with relative freedom until we reached the famed Casbah, the incredible labyrinthine quarter made famous over the world by Hollywood's film, *Algiers*, starring Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr. The armed guard at the entrance to the Casbah politely

but firmly turned the three black visitors away, offering no explanation beyond the simple statement that entrance was forbidden.” After his two African companions decided to return to the passenger ship, Fuller again attempted to enter the Casbah by himself, this time successfully so. As he explains, “In Paris, an Algerian friend had given me the name of a young freedom fighter in the Casbah and I set out to locate him.” Fuller eventually found this young freedom fighter and his comrades, with whom he “drank coffee and talked of African liberation. Afterwards,” he relays, “they walked with me down a twisting ‘street’ to the entrance above the great plaza. We said goodbye. As I strolled out, a guard stopped me. He asked me for my papers and I showed him my American passport. What was I doing in the Casbah? he asked. Didn’t I know that it was closed to tourists and that it was dangerous? ‘But, M’sieur,’ I said to him, mustering my best French, ‘I am a black man. The Algerians have no need to harm me. We are fighting the same war.’”³

Exactly ten years later, Hoyt Fuller, who, by that time, was editor of the important *Negro Digest* (which he renamed *Black World* shortly thereafter), returned to Algeria for the historic First Pan-African Cultural Festival, alongside more than 10,000 official delegates and visitors from more than thirty African nations, North and South America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Europe, including politicians, musicians, writers, scholars, filmmakers, actors, visual artists, and liberation movement leaders, as well as many others who held personal, professional, or political interests in the realization of a liberated and united Africa.⁴ And, as many attendees noted, there were few other places that would have seemed as appropriate for such an event as Algeria. Making this point rather explicitly, African American poet Ted Joans wrote, “Algeria, the largest country in North Africa. Algeria, the country that fought the enslaver and won. Algeria, the revolutionary stronghold of African nationalists. With these and many other black references, Algeria was ‘the place’ to stage the First Pan African Cultural Festival.”⁵

Indeed, in the decade leading up to the 1969 festival, Algeria became a powerful symbol of revolutionary struggle and was looked to as a model of revolutionary success for radicals around the world. Through widespread favorable coverage of its revolution and independence in the African American press, the many local screenings of the popular film *The Battle of Algiers*, and Frantz Fanon’s writings, Algeria came to hold a critical place in the iconography, rhetoric, and ideology of key branches of the African American freedom movement. By 1959, when Hoyt Fuller noted that the African American freedom movement and the Algerian independence movement were fighting “the same war,” African Americans had, for a long time, been identifying closely with Africa and African anti-colonial movements. As historian James Meriwether notes, this trend “can [at least] be traced back to black America’s responses to the Italo-Ethiopian War, which had energized widespread African American interest in the continent and had broadened many black Americans’ notions of ethnicity to include contemporary Africans.”⁶ Beginning during this period, greater numbers of African Americans sought to frame transnational identities for themselves, coming to an understanding of the connectedness of their struggle for civil rights and the

struggles of African nations for independence. Meriwether explains, “to advance their objectives, African Americans protested, lobbied, and worked with national governments and international organizations, thereby internationally politicizing their expanded constructions of identity.”⁷⁷

The recent body of works on the international and transnational dimensions of African American radicalism during the Long Civil Rights Movement and Black Power era has had such an impact that one historian has suggested that it “forms by itself a new canon and direction in the history of African Americans.”⁷⁸ The First Pan-African Cultural Festival of 1969, held in Algeria, represents an important moment in the history of African and African American political linkages but also begs larger historical questions about Algeria’s role as a site and symbol of revolutionary significance. And yet, Algeria is curiously absent from the secondary historical literature—when discussed, it has only been cursorily so.

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to trace the emergence of transnational solidarities between the African American freedom movement and Algeria during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras and to examine the place of Algeria in the African American political imaginary, using the 1969 Pan-African Festival as a moment through which to understand how these linkages were forged, tested, and contested. The story opens in the late 1950s and early 1960s when African Americans began drawing parallels between Algeria’s revolution for independence from France and their own freedom movement in the United States. African Americans strengthened their critique of a racist American society in their comparisons between French colonialism in Algeria and American segregation, and between the necessity for Algerian and African American armed resistance. But these linkages took on new meaning as African American radicals began traveling to and, in some cases, living in, Algeria, collaborating officially and unofficially with the Algerian government and the many revolutionary movements housed there. By the mid-1970s, however, Algeria had fallen from its position as a site and symbol of Third World solidarity. As Algeria found itself facing an increasingly dire economic situation, and as the African American freedom movement struggled to maintain momentum in the face of ever more severe repression by American authorities, transnational solidarity became less and less plausible. Ultimately, symbolic and practical ties between African America and Algeria were severed on account of Cold War geopolitics and economic interests, coupled with a mutual lack of understanding between African Americans and Algerians of the concrete challenges each other faced.

**“EVERY BROTHER ON A ROOFTOP CAN QUOTE FANON”:
ALGERIA IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINARY**

In October of 1962, shortly after Algeria had emerged victorious from a long and brutal revolution for independence, Ahmed Ben Bella, one of the leaders of the revolutionary National Liberation Front (FLN) and the newly appointed president of Algeria, made his way to New York City where he attended the United Nations’ induction ceremony for his young nation. During his stay at the Barclay

Hotel in midtown Manhattan, Ben Bella granted an exclusive, one-hour interview to Charles P. Howard, an accredited United Nations correspondent who played an important role in raising awareness about the connections between the situation of African Americans and that of oppressed people throughout the world through his informative articles in *Muhammad Speaks*, the nationally distributed weekly paper of the Nation of Islam.

Ben Bella, the subject of Howard's interview, received front-page coverage in *Muhammad Speaks*—his picture was accompanied by the headline: "Drive On To Free All Africa!" This is significant and symbolic in that, in part as a result of the relatively widespread coverage of the Algerian revolution and its leaders (like Ben Bella) in the Black press, Algeria became firmly linked to the discourse around the African American freedom movement. This kind of coverage placed Algeria alongside the Mau Mau rebellion and Ghanaian independence as helping keep issues of armed struggle and transnational political linkages in the minds and hearts of the African American masses, intellectuals, and activists.⁹ As *Muhammad Speaks* was the most widely circulating African American paper for much of the 1960s,¹⁰ it became an important appendage to the African American freedom movement, and especially the effort to internationalize that struggle and forge solidarities with African independence movements. Nearly every issue carried news and information on the state of African affairs and the Muslim world. And, as one historian has noted, the Black press often had greater reach than the strict circulation numbers reveal, for papers "passed from family to family and could be found in barbershops, churches, lodges, and pool parlors," just as "their contents passed by word of mouth among those who could not read."¹¹

Ben Bella's visit to the United States received coverage in the mainstream American press as well, as the *New York Times* ran, among other articles on Ben Bella's visit, one on his historic meeting with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Meeting at the Barclay Hotel, Dr. King and Ben Bella spoke with one another, with the aid of a translator, for nearly two hours. The *New York Times* headline read, "Ben Bella Links Two 'Injustices,'" along with the subheading, "Tells Dr. King Segregation Is Related to Colonialism." Thus, chief among the issues they discussed was the nature of the relationship between the segregation that African Americans were facing, the colonialism that the Algerian people faced under French rule, and Europe's continuing colonial and neocolonial domination of much of Africa and of the so-called Third World.¹² Arriving at a press conference following their meeting, Dr. King was described as having "emerged sounding more like Malcolm X than the civil rights leader reporters knew."¹³ King explained that "Ben Bella had made it 'very clear' that . . . he believed there was a direct relationship between the injustices of colonialism and the injustices of segregation here [in the U.S]."¹⁴ King went on to say that he agreed with Ben Bella and that "the struggle for integration here was 'a part of a larger worldwide struggle to gain human freedom and dignity.'"¹⁵ Ben Bella followed King by noting that the African American struggle was "widely publicized in Algeria, and in Africa more generally,"¹⁶ and concluded by declaring that "the United States could lose

its 'moral and political voice' in the world if it did not grapple with segregation problems here in a forthright manner."¹⁷

After his meeting with Ben Bella, King wrote an article himself for the widely read Black newspaper *New York Amsterdam News* titled "My Talk With Ben Bella" in which he detailed the nature of their conversation. He described Ben Bella and Algeria in these terms: "A few days ago I had the good fortune of talking with Premier Ben Bella of the New Algerian Republic. Algeria is one of the most recent African nations to remove the last sanction of colonialism. For almost two hours Mr. Ben Bella and I discussed issues ranging from the efficacy of non violence to the Cuban crisis. However, it was on the question of racial injustice that we spent most of our time."¹⁸ King continued, apparently surprised and encouraged, "the significance of our conversation was Ben Bella's complete familiarity with the progression of events in the Negro struggle for full citizenship. Our nation needs to note this well. All through our talks he repeated or inferred, 'We are brothers.' For Ben Bella, it was unmistakably clear that there is a close relationship between colonialism and segregation. He perceived that both are immoral systems aimed at the degradation of human personality. The battle of the Algerians against colonialism and the battle of the Negro against segregation is a common struggle."¹⁹

Before returning to Algeria to assume his role as president, Ben Bella went on to meet with Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., as well as Malcolm X—both significant figures in the emerging Black Power movement—at the well-known Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.²⁰ As Malcolm X embarked on a trip to the Middle East and Africa some two years later, he would again meet with Ben Bella during his stop in Algeria. The impact that his experience there had on him became evident when, just after returning from his trip, he spoke at the Militant Labor Forum in May 1964. In responding to the allegations that there existed some sort of "hate-gang" called the "Blood Brothers" that was based in Harlem and calculatedly committed crimes against whites, Malcolm declared,

I visited the Casbah . . . in Algiers, with some of the brothers—blood brothers. They took me all down into it and showed me the suffering, showed me the conditions they had to live under while they were being occupied by the French . . . They showed me the conditions that they lived under while they were colonized by these people from Europe. And they also showed me what they had to do to get these people off their back. The first thing they had to realize was that all of them were brothers; oppression made them brothers; exploitation made them brothers; degradation made them brothers; discrimination made them brothers; segregation made them brothers; humiliation made them brothers . . . The same conditions that prevailed in Algeria that forced the people, the noble people of Algeria, to resort eventually to the terrorist-type tactics that were necessary to get the monkey off their backs, those same conditions prevail today in America in every Negro community.²¹

In this speech, and in others that he made after this time, Malcolm X drew important parallels between the Algerian revolution and the African American freedom movement. As a result, he helped spread awareness of the Algerian struggle but

simultaneously advocated for a global perspective on the situation and conditions of African Americans in America. In particular, his comparison of the Casbah in Algiers to Harlem in New York City was to become a familiar one, especially with the release of the film *The Battle of Algiers* in 1966.

Francee Covington, a student in political science at Harlem University in the late 1960s, penned an essay titled "Are the Revolutionary Techniques Employed in *The Battle of Algiers* Applicable to Harlem?" that appeared in the anthology *The Black Woman*, an important product of the Black Arts Movement edited by Toni Cade Bambara. Covington noted, "The Chinese Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and even the Kenyan Revolution labeled 'Mau Mau' have not been given the attention that the Algerian Revolution has. This is primarily because of the great extent to which the public has been made aware of this specific revolutionary instance through the writings of Fanon and the more graphic motion-picture illustration, *The Battle of Algiers*."²² She also made the following point: "In the past few years the works of Frantz Fanon have become widely read and quoted by those involved in the 'Revolution' that has begun to take place in the communities of Black America. If *The Wretched of the Earth* is the 'handbook for the Black Revolution,' then *The Battle of Algiers* is its movie counterpart."²³ As the title of the piece makes clear, Covington's essay evaluated the relevancy of the strategies and techniques used in the film by the Algerian revolutionaries against the French colonizers to the situation of African Americans in urban communities throughout the United States.

After drawing parallels and then pointing out important differences, Covington concluded that "the idea of importing the techniques of revolution that were successful in one place may prove disastrous in another place,"²⁴ implying that it would be misleading to assume that because the Algerians were successful, the same approach could succeed in Harlem and urban Black America more broadly. Despite her rejection of the possibility of the relevancy of *The Battle of Algiers*, the fact of her meditation upon that possibility is in itself a testament to the degree to which the Algerian revolution became an important point of reference and to which there was an understood relationship between the African independence movements and the African American freedom movement.

Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquan psychiatrist and intellectual who joined the Algerian struggle for independence, also became a revolutionary point of reference and his writings helped cultivate a generation of Black liberation theorists and activists in America: "Fanon's ideas were unleashed at a moment truly coincidental with the phenomenal impact of the Black Power Movement in the United States which transformed the Civil Rights Movement into the Black Liberation Movement, subdued more moderate black organizations and leaders by transforming some into Black Power organizations and spawning new ones."²⁵ The publication of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in America in 1965 was hailed by Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, as "itself a historical event,"²⁶ and he referred to the book from then on as "the Black Bible."²⁷ The Black Panther Party was known for conducting teach-ins for

The Wretched of the Earth at chapter meetings throughout the country.²⁸ And, at moments, Stokely Carmichael, famous for popularizing the term Black Power and for acting as the honorary prime minister of the Black Panther Party, saluted Frantz Fanon as his own personal “patron saint.”²⁹

Although Fanon’s writings may have first been popular only among a select few, by 1970, *The Wretched of the Earth* alone had sold 750,000 copies.³⁰ As anecdotal evidence of the significance of Fanon to the everyday African American Black Power proponent, when in conversation with Jimmy Breslin of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and in what is now an oft-quoted testimonial by Dan Watts, the editor of *Liberator* magazine, Watts told Breslin that, “You’re going along thinking all the brothers in these riots are old winos . . . Nothing could be further from the truth. These cats are ready to die for something. And they know why. They all read. Read a lot. Not one of them hasn’t read the Bible.” Breslin questioned, “The Bible?” And Watts responded, “Fanon . . . you’d better get this book. Every brother on a rooftop can quote Fanon.”³¹

Fanon’s place in the African American freedom struggle cannot be overstated, for although he did not write much himself about the African American situation, his words and ideas were adopted and adapted and generally were thought to be of great relevance to revolutionary struggles around the world. Through his writings, as well as through the popular film *The Battle of Algiers* and the ever-influential African American press, Algeria and Algerian leaders like Ben Bella were crystallized as symbols of revolutionary significance. They came to hold great meaning for many who were themselves engaged in a protracted struggle for freedom. However, Algeria’s significance was not simply to be found in its being a symbol; Algeria also became a very real supporter of many African American radicals who had the opportunity to travel to Africa and visit the nation.

**“THERE WAS A BATTLE IN ALGIERS . . . ”:
THE FIRST PAN-AFRICAN CULTURAL FESTIVAL OF 1969**

There was a battle in Algiers in late July . . . The troops came together, African generals and footsoldiers in the war of words and politics that splashed against the calm waters of the Mediterranean Sea—in the First Pan-African Cultural Festival—from everywhere in greater numbers than ever before; from San Francisco to Senegal, from Dakar to the District of Columbia.³²

—Nathan Hare, “Algiers 1969: A Report on the Pan-African Cultural Festival”

Upon hearing of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Eldridge Cleaver, the Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, proclaimed,

That there is a holocaust coming I have no doubt at all. I have been talking to people around the country by telephone—people intimately involved in the black liberation struggle—and their reaction to Dr. King’s murder has been unanimous: the war has begun. The violent phase of the black liberation struggle is here, and it will spread. From that shot, from that blood. America will be painted red. Dead bodies will litter the streets and the scenes will be reminiscent of

the disgusting, terrifying, and nightmarish news reports coming out of Algeria during the height of the general violence right before the final breakdown of the French colonial regime.³³

Cleaver's words capture the profound anger and disillusionment as well as newfound determination for liberation that was birthed by King's death. The days following the tragic event were met head-on by violent uprisings in cities throughout United States, including a series of incidents which resulted in Cleaver's apprehension by the police.

Although the First Pan-African Cultural Festival could not be said to have any direct relationship to King's death, the festival certainly occurred while the stench of King's death and all that it brought in its aftermath still lingered in the air. And Cleaver's words were prophetic both in his call to arms for African Americans (evident in the riots that occurred around the country in the ensuing days and weeks) and in his evocation of Algeria, for he would find himself in the very city of *The Battle of Algiers* only one year later. After clandestinely leaving the United States to evade being sent back to prison for a charge of parole violation, Cleaver headed to Cuba where he hoped to receive "backing to establish a base for Black Panther political and military action against the United States."³⁴ He soon found out that the Cuban authorities were not going to provide such support, and he was eventually transported to Algeria, where he initially received a more sympathetic welcome. Amidst the preparations for the festival, Algerian authorities offered Cleaver and his fellow Panther members official invitations to the forthcoming festivities. Cleaver did not formally announce the fact of his residence in Algeria until some time later, at the opening of the festival, when he held a press conference specifically for that purpose.

The idea for the Pan-African Cultural Festival originally came about in September 1967 at an Organization of African Unity (OAU) Council of Ministers meeting held in Kinshasa, Congo, where the decision was made that "there is an urgent need to undertake common measures that would assist in the popularizing, development and refinement of the various cultures obtaining in Africa."³⁵ As a result, the OAU passed a resolution to "sponsor an All-African Festival of African Drama, Folk Song, and Instrumental Music."³⁶ Not long afterward, the Algerian government, with aid from the OAU, went about publicizing the July-August 1969 gathering. Anticipation was quick to build, as the African press—as varied as *Fraternité Matin* of the Ivory Coast, *L'Effort Camerounais* of Cameroon, *Jeune Afrique*, a French language Pan-African magazine published out of Paris, *La Semaine* of Congo-Brazzaville, *El-Ayam* of Sudan—and many more periodicals throughout the continent, Europe, America, and the Caribbean announced the coming of and significance of the First Pan-African Cultural Festival.³⁷

In America, the African American press played an important role in publicizing the festival. The Nation of Islam's *Muhammad Speaks* ran several articles in anticipation of the festival. One article in particular, titled "Algerian Festival to Spotlight Africa's Vast Cultural Heritage," reported, "Massive preparations are under way for the First Pan-African Cultural Festival . . . Black artists from

America and 15 African nations will attend and museums throughout the continent are sending works of art—some hundreds of years old—to the cultural festival, which promises to be the greatest event in the history of Africa, if not the entire world.”³⁸ Alongside print publicity, travel agencies began organizing and advertising group tours of Africa, which centered around the Pan-African Festival in Algiers. The *Africa Tourist and Travel Agency*, based in New York City, printed brochures for a tour they organized specifically for the festival, which they called the “Organization for African Unity Cultural Festival Tour.”³⁹ The tour, to be hosted by the “tour personality,” renowned jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal, was to last a total of twenty-one days, from July 21 through August 11, 1969, and would include travel through Morocco and Algeria. It is likely that travel agencies similar to the *Africa Tourist and Travel Agency*—which most likely catered to a largely middle-class, African American clientele as well as social and political organizations whose focus was the African American and African freedom movement(s)—would have organized comparable group trips to the Pan-African Festival.

The eagerness of the participants and attendees of the festival mirrored the triumphant language of the newspaper and magazine announcements of the approaching event. Dave Burrell, a young jazz pianist who was invited to play at the festival, described he and his bandmates’ preparations for their departure:

Before we went, we got as African as we could get in New York . . . the dashikis had just come into vogue, and we were sort of very much in the vanguard of the movement in New York . . . [we had] to run around New York and get African material and make the dashikis and the different skull caps and to have the Black Power sign . . . I remember [fellow musician] Sunny Murray saying to me, “Hey, I joined the Panthers.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yeah, don’t tell anybody.” He showed me a little membership card. I said “Oh, where did you do this?” He said, “I did it in Philadelphia.”⁴⁰

Sunny Murray most likely joined the Panthers knowing full well that Cleaver had surfaced in Algiers. The anticipation was felt among all who were planning to attend. Henri Lopes, at the time a budding writer and the Minister of Education for Congo-Brazzaville who was helping lead the country’s delegation to the festival, was also quite eager, as he recounted:

My arrival in Algeria was met with great emotion, in large part because our political consciousness . . . was cultivated as a result of our knowledge of the Algerian war for independence. And so, for us, it was the country that had obtained genuine independence, more so than most African countries, and to arrive there, it was like going to a Rome or a Mecca . . . Secondly, the artists, the creators in Africa, each one of us was isolated in our countries . . . And, the Festival gave us all the opportunity to meet one another, to exchange ideas with one another, and try to get to know one another . . . Thus, the Festival represented a tangible image of what could one day be a united Africa.⁴¹

The Festival opened on July 21, 1969, with a speech from Algerian president Houari Boumedienne, which began,

Algeria is happy to welcome the First Pan-African Cultural Festival on behalf of our entire continent. The importance of this event and the joy and enthusiasm which it has aroused and is still arousing, the diversity and quality of the manifestations to which it will give rise, should not make us forget to what an extent this first Pan-African Cultural Festival is concerned, not only with our values and sensitivities, but also with our very existence as Africans and our common future. This Festival, far from being an occasion for general festivities which might momentarily distract us from our daily tasks and problems, should rather be related to them and make a direct connection to our vast effort of construction. It constitutes an intrinsic part of the struggle we are all pursuing in Africa—whether that of development, of the struggle against racialism, or of national liberation.⁴²

El Moudjahid was quick to find peoples' first impressions of the Pan African Festival as they questioned people on the street and published the responses in an article titled "Le Coeur d'Alger Bat Au Rythme Du Festival" ("The Heart of Algiers Beats to the Rhythm of the Festival"). On the very same page in that issue of the newspaper, there appeared an article titled "Quand Le Jazz Se Veut Arme De Combat" ("When Jazz Becomes A Weapon of Combat"), which reprinted a poem by the African American poet Ted Joans called "Behind the Smile of Black Jazz." Every day over the period of two weeks, *El Moudjahid* covered, in great detail, the events and happenings in Algiers. There were daily symposia around issues of critical importance to the social, political, cultural, and economic development of Africa as well as musical, theatrical, and dance performances throughout the city.

One of the more popular attractions of the festival was the Afro-American Center, located in the heart of downtown Algiers, a space lent to Cleaver and the Black Panthers by the Algerians. It was part of the support that the Algerian government granted the Panthers, which also included a hilltop villa in which to reside, monthly salaries, and access to telecommunications, among other such amenities. Young Algerians flocked to the center in large numbers and out of great curiosity. The Black Panthers—including Emory Douglas, David Hilliard, and Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver—staged informational lectures and discussions and handed out plenty of party material and memorabilia, including pamphlets, posters, and pins. With Algeria's support, the Black Panthers were able to publicize their platform, their ideology, and their perspective on the condition of African Americans to a global audience, including revolutionary movements from around the world that were sympathetic to their cause.

American expatriate William Klein was commissioned by the Algerian government to film the festival, but while in the country, he was also able to complete another documentary, titled *Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther*. In the film, Cleaver expressed what a gathering such as the festival meant for he and the Black Panthers:

When I left the United States, I had no idea that I would end up in Algeria, but I think that I was very fortunate coming to Algeria at the time of the festival and to receive an invitation to participate in the festival, to have the opportunity to establish the Afro-American Center which we opened for the festival, which gave us an opportunity to make ourselves known to the other liberation movements who were brought together by the festival. The stage was set. People came here specifically to check each other out, to see what was going on, and to get some idea as to which movements they could relate to.⁴³

At another moment in the film, for which Klein “organized a meeting between Black Panthers and African revolutionary movement leaders at a restaurant”⁴⁴ with the intention of them having a substantive exchange of ideas and opinions, a representative of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union articulated rather remarkably the degree to which there was understood to be a common struggle between African Americans and Africans. The Zimbabwean declared, “We are following the struggle of our Afro-American brothers in the United States and I am sure they are also following our struggles. The people of Zimbabwe have taken up arms and we are facing a common enemy, and it is this common enemy which we must all crush. If our Afro-American brothers score success in the United States, that success is not only theirs, it is ours too.”⁴⁵

The First Pan-African Cultural Festival of 1969 was a moment that embodied both the hopes and desires of the many African and African American radicals gathered there but also demonstrated the great depths of an understood connection between their respective struggles. Host to an incredible array of artists and activists, including for example, Nina Simone, Stokely Carmichael and then-wife Miriam Makeba, Archie Shepp, Maya Angelou, and Ed Bullins, the festival was not without its own contradictions and tensions, but not at the complete expense of progress toward Pan-African unity, strengthened transnational solidarities, substantive exchanges of ideas, and practical political gains. Its impact reverberated out beyond the two weeks of festivities, as those that attended carried their experiences at the festival back with them to their various communities, just as their were a series of practical institutional developments in the domain of the arts and culture for the continent of Africa.⁴⁶

“THE STRUGGLE WAS NOT YET OVER . . . ”: THE LEGACY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAN-AFRICAN FESTIVAL

It is evident that since its staging in July 1969 in Algiers, the First Pan-African Cultural Festival has not yet, one the hand, been the subject of as much interest as it would normally merit, and on the other, been subjected to critical and profound analysis. Outside of publicity articles, brief informational articles, or violent oral responses, no sort of collective or individual position has been taken on the continental or international implications of the Festival or even the problems that were debated there.⁴⁷

—*Souffles: Revue Culturelle Arabe Du Maghreb*

The above excerpt from an editorial in the Moroccan-published journal *Souffles*, which appeared at the beginning of 1970, quite strikingly captured the critical reception of the Pan-African Festival, or lack thereof. In the immediate aftermath of the festival, one could not find a great deal of evidence of meaningful reflection on the festival's significance, just as evidence of its significance cannot be easily found in the secondary historical literature now. And yet it is clear that the First Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers, Algeria, in 1969 represents a watershed moment in the history of linkages between the African American and African freedom movements. The festival gave voice to these important ideas and provided the context for a broad range of African and African diasporic intellectuals, artists, activists, and students come into conversation with one another, in some cases literally, and in others, symbolically. Reflections offered by attendees of the festival provide insight into the unique impact that it had on all who were present.

Dennis Brutus, the South African poet, was in London, England, when he first heard of the Festival. He wrote the Algerian government to notify them of his interest in the event and was subsequently invited as a delegate of South Africa. When asked to reflect on the festival, despite mentioning the elation the moment evoked, Brutus was struck by the degree to which the Algeria he had come to know through hearing of the courageous struggle for independence was very much in crisis even only seven years after its triumph:

We had this great festival. But, I had a sense that the resistance movement in Algeria, which had been very important for the whole continent—it inspired people from all over the continent—I had a sense that in the society, already there was beginning to develop a division between your middle-class, really affluent Algerians, and the people in the Casbah . . .

When I went into the Casbah, you know, I had that sense of on the one hand you have an elite and on the other hand, people are struggling. So, although Algeria was important for South Africa—many South Africans in the resistance trained with the Algerian army—one had the sense that while there had been a struggle, the struggle was not yet over. And, in fact, the French were returning because their need for Algerian oil . . . Even while they were hating the Algerians, they still wanted the Algerian oil and this conflict developed as a division in this society.⁴⁸

Michele Russell, an African American woman from Washington, D.C., was struck by the apparent failures of the Algerian revolution and the failure of the nation to live up to its image as the country that expelled the colonizer by force, much in the same way Brutus had been disappointed. However, she left the festival while it was still at its “height,” allowing her to carry with her a sense of admiration for her ancestral homeland, just as it seems her experience there was a rite of passage of sorts, as it was her first trip to Africa:

We had seen the film “Battle of Algiers” in the States. Now, wandering the city, each street came upon us with the shock of a double exposure. Neon signs became the flames of bombed cafes. Women in veils became saboteurs. Taxi drivers, the incarnation

of dedicated cadres careening around corners to unknown rendezvous . . . Now, seven years after victory, the liberation struggle has just begun. It goes on in their faces. In almost imperceptible hesitation when they are addressed in Arabic and respond in French. Now, seven years later. The resistance . . .

I left Algeria at the height of the festival. I left her at the point where I would have the most to come back to. And I felt I would come back, if not this land, then to some other part of the Continent that was helping me to return to myself as well. I left for home. I left at the moment I knew that wherever I was I would be, forever, home.⁴⁹

For Barbara Chase-Riboud, the world-renowned African American writer and sculptor, her attendance at the festival helped bring about an artistic breakthrough, for although she was not exhibiting any of her own work there, she had something of an epiphany while amidst the festivities. She explains the very specific developments in her artwork that grew directly out of her experiences in Algiers:

[The festival] was wonderful. It was stupendous. And, at that time, I made a big change in my own work, in my own sculpture . . . I had been, sort of, in a kind of surrealist mood, with elongated figures and so on. But, they had been getting more and more abstract and I couldn't figure out a way to get them off the legs and off the pedestal. And suddenly, like a light bulb over my head—and it was in Algiers—I realized that I all I had to do was to make them into objects that could be moved by something. And, that something turned out to be silk. That's when I began to do those Malcolm X [sculptures].⁵⁰

Chase-Riboud's series of sculptures in memory of Malcolm X were indelibly shaped by the addition of silk to her artistic repertoire—an idea that came to her in the midst of the fervor of the festival.

Henri Lopes, the prize-winning Congolese novelist and present-day Congolese ambassador to France, also attaches artistic significance to the Pan-African Festival. Prior to the festival, he had only published a couple of poems, but not long after, he began publishing what would become prize-winning novels. Here, he describes the festival's personal and artistic significance:

The importance that the festival had for me, personally, was that after my presentation [at the symposium], a lot of people began thinking of me as a writer. Oh, I had barely written. I had published a few poems in the journal *Présence Africaine*, but no novels. And, I had the impression of being—how does one say it—an impostor with that title [of “writer”]. And, when I returned home, that's when I began writing my first work, my collection of short stories, *Tribaliques*. That was after Algiers. I did two things. I quit smoking and I wrote my first book.⁵¹

For another writer, Haki Madhubuti, or Don Lee as he was known at the time, the festival held very different meaning. A poet and essayist of the Black Arts Movement, Madhubuti was struck by the sights and sounds of the historic event but it only made him more aware of the work that had yet to be done in Black communities in the United States. He explains,

The level of conversation, the level of dialogue, and the level of interaction was very political, highly charged, and most certainly, our conversations were struggle-driven . . . But, this is a very difficult time because COINTELPRO is coming on strong, the red squads in Chicago, and the Panthers had been driven all out of the country, I mean, Algiers, as well as Cuba and so forth . . . I knew Kwame Ture and Eldridge Cleaver and people like that. So, to go and see them in other spaces and being received royally was very good. But, also, it just spoke to me loudly that the work that we needed to do here [in the U.S.] was just not being done, because if we were doing the proper work here they wouldn't have to leave, they would have protection. And so . . . to my heart, it said, "Go back to Chicago, go back to the States, and just move the work up another volume." And, for me, the volume was, essentially, developing independent Black institutions.⁵²

Lastly, for Hoyt Fuller, who had traveled widely on the African continent, the First Pan-African Cultural Festival of 1969 represented the coming into fruition of meaningful transnational solidarities between Africans and African Americans and the advent of a new moment, full of new possibilities and new struggles: "Pan-Africanism is an idea whose time has come. That fact is, for me, the central meaning of Algiers 1969 . . . That was what it meant to me to have Africans from all over the world assembling on the soil of Frantz Fanon's adopted country to consider the direction the peoples of the African continent should take . . . Algiers was the Black World coming of Age."⁵³ It seems that for Fuller the "coming of age" of the "Black World" meant the collaboration of African peoples across borders of nation and language, just as it meant coming to terms with the complexity inherent in such transnational solidarities. Long had African and African diasporic peoples understood the political and cultural connections they shared, and yet it meant something different to confront one another and learn more intimately the details of the struggles of dispersed revolutionary movements. And therein lies a deeply significant aspect of the presence and official recognition of African American activists in Algeria. The possibility (and reality) of sustained dialogue was transformatory—Barbara Easley, one of the Black Panthers that lived in Algeria, has recounted, "I met women from other liberation movements, and that's where my knowledge of the world became more focused, because when people say, 'I'm from so and so,' you start looking at the world map, whether it's Asia, Africa, South America, and then you start listening to other people's historical battles, and then you realize that you're not the only group of little black people, this select group of African Americans in America that are fighting for that freedom."⁵⁴ And, in a 1971 *New York Times Magazine* article, journalist Sanche de Gramont described the status in Algeria of Eldridge Cleaver and his fellow Black Panthers in exile, writing, "in Algiers, the Panthers are respected as one of approximately a dozen liberation movements accredited by the Algerian Government and provided with assistance and support in their task of overthrowing the governments in power in their respective countries . . . They plan to maintain close contact with other liberation movements."⁵⁵ He quoted Cleaver as having explained, "This . . . is the first time in the struggle of the black people in America that they have established representation abroad."⁵⁶

**HIJACKING FREEDOM, HIJACKING HOPE:
THE “FLEURY FOUR” AND THE END OF AN ERA**

Writing from their prison cells in Fleury-Mérogis, France, in 1978, George Brown, Joyce Tillerson, and Melvin and Jean McNair hoped to successfully make a case for their release. As their lawyers explained, their four narratives, published collectively as *Nous, Noirs Américains évadés Du Ghetto* [*We, Black American Escapees From the Ghetto*], were “essentially their defense”⁵⁷ against both extradition to the United States and to a prison sentence in France. George, Joyce, Melvin, and Jean did not deny having committed the hijacking of a commercial airplane from Detroit to Algeria in July of 1972 (along with successfully procuring a million-dollar ransom from Delta Air Lines), but they insisted that their actions represented a desperate attempt to escape the oppressive American racism under which they had too long suffered. It was no small accident, however, that they chose Algeria as their destination. They knew full well of the existence of the International Section of the Black Panther Party there as well as the presence of numerous Black Panther members, including Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, Communications Secretary Kathleen Cleaver, Field Marshal Don Cox, and, at various other times, fellow Party members Larry Mack, Sekou Odinga, James and Gwen Patterson, and Barbara Easley, among others.⁵⁸ In fact, the hijackers intended for the million-dollar ransom to be of aid to the community of exiled Black Panthers that had been living in Algeria since as early as 1969.

In what was the seventeenth American hijacking of 1972, Melvin McNair, George Brown, and George Wright commanded the pilots to land the Delta Air Lines plane in Miami, call in for a million-dollar ransom to be delivered by federal agents wearing only swimsuits (so that they could be sure the agents were not carrying any concealed weapons), and unload the passengers, while their accomplices, Joyce Tillerson and Jean McNair, waited anxiously in their seats with their three children.⁵⁹ The hijackers demanded that Delta also provide an international navigator, and since none was available in Miami, the plane took off for Boston, where their last demand was met. Commanding the international navigator to take off without instructions about where to head, it was only after some time in the air that the hijackers informed the pilot that he was to take them to Algeria.⁶⁰

Landing at the airport in Algiers, the capital city of Algeria, the five hijackers and their three children had made it safely to their destination. The United States, responding to what was the most expensive hijacking in American history up until that time,⁶¹ sought the return of the ransom money and “the extradition of the hijackers to the United States, or prosecution of them on air piracy charges in Algeria.”⁶² But the hijackers were aware that only several months prior, a male and female couple had hijacked a plane from the United States to Algeria (and temporarily made away with a \$500,000 ransom from Western Airlines). The couple received conditional asylum in Algeria and ample coverage in the American media.

However, Algeria was becoming less and less patient with such incidents. Having attempted to strengthen economic ties to the United States since the late

1960s, Algeria understood that its ability to do so depended on its standing in the eyes of the U.S. government. An August 19, 1972, a *New York Times* article reported, “[Black] panther officers [in the U.S.] say the government has been putting pressure on Algeria by threatening to cancel a proposed \$1-billion plan to import Algerian natural gas to this country. The State Department denied this.”⁶³ The evidence suggests that the Panthers were, in fact, not far from the truth. One memorandum of a conversation between the U.S. Secretary of State under Nixon, William Rogers, and the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, held only a couple months after the Detroit-to-Algiers hijacking, contained the following summary of remarks from Secretary of State Rogers: “USG [U.S. Government] appreciates return of planes, crew and money [in the Western and Delta cases], and hopes that if GOA [Government of Algeria] cannot extradite it can at least prosecute the hijackers . . . Algeria has a moderate and reasonable government and is attractive to American investment, but hijacking incidents have damaged Algeria’s image.”⁶⁴ A portion of Bouteflika’s remarks were summarized as follows: “GOA [Government of Algeria] would jealously guard its own national independence and would support national liberation movements of peoples deprived of their right by colonial powers. This includes support of liberation movements in Portuguese Africa, South Africa and Rhodesia . . . Bouteflika said GOA is interest in developing its relations with U.S. and added that Black Panthers do not make any effective contribution to Algeria from revolutionary, ideological or moral standpoint.”⁶⁵ So, as fate would have it, the arrival of the newest contingent of exiled Panthers—George Brown, George Wright, Joyce Tillery, and Melvin and Jean McNair—although it represented an extraordinary feat, also spelled the beginning of the end of a symbolic and strategic solidarity between African American freedom movements and the country of Algeria. Algeria’s economic dependence on American investment and the Algerian administration’s pursuit of better diplomatic relations between the two nations essentially required that Algeria cease supporting the exiled Black Panthers. Algeria had not had formal diplomatic relations with the United States since 1967, when the two countries broke ties. But by December 1973, when Secretary of State Kissinger met with Algerian president Boumediene, “senior American officials said that they expected a rapid intensification of contacts between the two governments and the probable exchange of ambassadors within a couple of months.”⁶⁶

Nearly all the exiled Black Panthers left Algeria for Europe around the same time, citing deteriorating relations with the government. While some eventually negotiated deals with the American government to return to the United States, some made lives for themselves in other countries, while still others were caught by the authorities and had to face the possibility of prison time. Black Power activists in the United States were increasingly facing similar fates as local, state, and federal authorities aggressively worked to stamp out movements seen as threats to order and national security. This was the case for the last group of Panther hijackers to arrive in Algiers. On May 26, 1976, four of the five hijackers were arrested in Paris by the French police who were investigating an American request for their

extradition.⁶⁷ Concerned parties in France quickly formed a committee to publicize the case and generate support for the defendants. The committee was able to get *Nous, Noirs Américains évadés Du Ghetto* published on behalf of the four hijackers. Separated into four parts, each containing the autobiographical narrative of one of the defendants, the book was meant as a testimony to the ugliness and tyranny of racism in America.

Although not exactly acquitted of their crimes, the hijackers escaped extradition to the United States and were sentenced to a few years in French prison. One of their defense attorneys, Louis Labadie, proclaimed, "This is a success . . . It is a condemnation of American racism."⁶⁸ The case presented in court "asserted . . . that the hijacking was a 'political act' motivated by racial oppression," and the defense team "produced witnesses to describe instances of police brutality, job discrimination, school segregation, poverty, hunger, and 'armed terrorism' in the United States."⁶⁹ And since the defendants had already served about two years of jail time in France as they awaited the completion of the trial, "the women were expected to be released within days and the men in about six months."⁷⁰ It was noted that "before a United States court, they would have faced minimum jail terms of 20 years."⁷¹ The hijackers—often called the "Fleury Four" after the well-known prison in the town of the same name—had put American racism on trial and had won. And yet, it was a bittersweet victory. Even as they had hijacked their freedom from American oppression, hope had been hijacked from the possibility for a renewed solidarity between Algeria and African American activists, at least on the same scale as had once been.

In the decade or so following its independence from France, Algeria became a critical node in the constellation of transnational solidarities being forged among revolutionary movements around the world. At the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, just as Algeria looked to Black America as "that part of the Third World situated in the belly of the beast,"⁷² so, too, did much of Black America look to Algeria as "the country that fought the enslaver and won."⁷³ Key figures and factions in the African American freedom movement, often otherwise thought to represent different ideological positions, from King to Malcolm, from the Nation of Islam to the Black Panther Party, as only a few examples among many, took up Algeria and Algeria's revolution in an attempt to imagine and bring into being transnational collaboration. In each case, the implicated parties were looking to leverage the position and resources gained vis-à-vis the other, but that was part and parcel of the work of imagining and creating these transnational connections and also of understanding how they were formed, strengthened, and eventually disintegrated.

Although American Cold War and oil geopolitics ultimately disrupted the transnational linkages between African America and Algeria, the legacy of these connections endure in unique ways in the culture and politics of the twenty-first century. One only has to look to Algerian national life for proof of this fact. At the time of negotiations with American officials for large oil contracts in the mid-1970s (which led, in part, to the demise of the Black Panther community

in Algeria), then-Algerian Foreign Affairs Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika played an important diplomatic role. Three-and-a-half decades later, Bouteflika became president, and oil politics continue to be a defining issue in Algerian national and international affairs. And, although the era of substantive transnational solidarities between African America and Algeria remains a distant memory, few attendees of the festival could probably have imagined that the same downtown streets of Algiers where jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp once collaborated with traditional Algerian musicians are now brimming with Algerian youth who define their cultural lives through the African American cultural form known as hip-hop, in some cases using it to speak out powerfully against the pervasive injustice that plagues their country and the world at large.⁷⁴ Looking to seize on this kind of cultural vibrancy and to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the festival, Algeria is in the midst of planning for the 2nd Pan-African Cultural Festival, scheduled to take place in July 2009.⁷⁵ What will be of great interest to historians is how this new festival attempts to make sense of the legacy of the 1969 gathering in Algiers, and of the dynamic fusion of culture and politics that defined that bygone era.

NOTES

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