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"THE UNIVERSAL IS THE ENTIRE COLLECTION OF PARTICULARS": GROUNDING IDENTITY IN A SHARED HORIZON OF HUMANITY

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In a poem entitled "To Keorapetse Kgositsile" written in 1971, African-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks proclaimed:

Well, every fella's a Foreign Country.
This foreign country speaks to You. (Kgositsile 1971, 15)

This was a particularly apt description of Keorapetse William Kgositsile (1938–), South African poet laureate and a key figure in the American Black Arts movement. Kgositsile was writing against the apartheid system while living out a period of exile in the US (1961–1975), Tanzania, Botswana, and Zambia. Kgositsile was "foreign" to all these countries, yet his poetry, in tackling experiences of racial oppression through visceral metaphors, lent his voice an immediacy and force that crossed national boundaries with ease. At a time when some prominent African Americans were giving themselves African names, so tying themselves to the particulars of a reified and bounded 'national' community, Kgositsile's poetry shows that such 'Africanness' only retained useful meaning when it was also transnational. His black body existed in a space of in-betweenness; it was simultaneously American and African, suggesting that national struggles for justice, such as that against apartheid and racist segregation, only acquired meaning through universalizing discourses within transnational imaginaries. Kgositsile's poetry analyzes blackness, American-ness, and African-ness as unifying concepts, equating violence against black bodies in the US with that against black bodies in South Africa to articulate a lived universalism.

In doing so, Kgositsile's poetry presents an alternative to circumscribed rights discourses that are imposed within exclusionary racial, national, and cultural 'particulars' by hegemonic institutions such as the nation-state, even as they claim to be universalizing. At the same time, Kgositsile's poetry retains an open-ended discursive notion of the universal as the basis for identity, to be realized only through the particular lived experiences of individuals. Such an open-ended universalism cannot be easily co-opted by power precisely because it is slippery and shape-shifting. Every person, in this schema, is a particular, unique addition to a universal horizon of humanity. Rather than setting up the particular in opposition to the universal, Kgositsile harnesses a flexible free-verse poetic form that posits the universal as an unbounded sum of particulars and formulates a revitalized version of humanism as a basis for identity. I argue that Kgositsile's exile poetry points to a theoretical space where the cultural and national specificity of certain human rights oppressions, and the fight against them, must necessarily open out into the humane and the universal, tearing across national boundaries to point towards the commonalities that underpin human life and ethics.

I first locate my argument within a critique of institutionalized rights discourses. These discourses are marked in their implementation by a tension between the universal and particular. They are almost always abstractions that fail to lend meaning and force to the particulars of experience, too often becoming co-opted by the ends of power. I then show that such a critique does not apply to universalizing discourses themselves but only to their implementation by institutionalized structures of power within the nation-state. Black poets, including Kgositsile, Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka (1934–), and Martiniquan anticolonial activist and poet Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), employ a universalizing, transnational discourse of humanity against hegemonic ends, reconceptualizing the universal as a sum of lived particulars rather than as reified, transcendent essence. I show that unlike the bildungsroman form associated with prose narrative, which often legitimizes institutionalized rights discourses by naturalizing the liberal humanist subject, the poetics used by Kgositsile showcases the necessarily limitless and cumulative nature of an open-ended universal human. Together, these historical discourses point towards the need for a renewed politically and contextually grounded transnational and critical post-Enlightenment humanism.

A CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONALIZED DISCOURSES OF THE HUMAN

At the center of my argument is a critique of institutionalized universalizing discourses when they are imposed from above, though not of universalizing rights discourses per se. In this respect, my argument differs from that of theorists such as Pheng Cheah, who argues that it is impossible to achieve transcendent, universal justice because such an ideal is always already overtaken by localized vested interests. Universalizing ideals, for Cheah, are implicated in relations of power and implemented by the nation-state in unjust ways. Cheah thus questions the tenability of cosmopolitanism, a discursive force he defines as underlying legal

regimes of rights in the form of “an intellectual ethic, a universal humanism that transcends regional particularism” (Cheah 2007, 21).

However, the discursive subject of the liberal-humanist Enlightenment tradition and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 to provide a framework for contemporary human rights law—is not inherently an oppressive formulation. Rather, it is rendered unjust when it is imposed in exclusionary ways by globalized power. For instance, the Enlightenment conception of the human functioned as an emancipatory, revolutionary tool in Europe, even though, as various postcolonial critics have noted, it was then co-opted by European nation-states as a colonialist tool seeking to civilize the “savages” in line with their own particular conception of “universal man” (Hall 1996, 252).¹ According to the latter emphasis, the universal human was at best an ambivalent mode of resistance, a violent shaping force on indigenous epistemologies, and a central conceit through which liberal-humanist narratives of modernity acquired power. When colonized peoples failed to live up to this always-already unattainable ideal, colonists characterized them as less than human. This state of affairs led anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko to point out that African cultures had been painted as irreconcilably Other and inhuman, with both colonists and nationalists producing “the thickest of volumes on some of the strangest subjects,” even including the need to reform “the feeding habits of the Urban Africans” (Biko 1987, 40). Such a colonialist universal human, then, was unable to resolve a tension between the universal and the particular, for, as Ania Loomba puts it, the seemingly universal “central figure of Western humanist and Enlightenment discourses, the humane, knowing subject of these regimes,” turned out to be nothing more than an insidious particular—the “white male colonialist” (Loomba 2005, 60).

It is not surprising, then, that in theorizing the grounds for identity within contexts of emancipatory struggle, critics in the humanities have often chosen to emphasize particulars of difference over what they have regarded as a naïve and dangerous universalism (Chomsky and Foucault 2006, 43).² Cheah has even gone as far as suggesting that the universal human should be abandoned as a political tool because of the harm that an emphasis on universality has done (Cheah 2007, 9). This narrative has been consistently aided by the poststructuralist turn in philosophical thinking, which asked: “How do we conceive the other outside of our inherited concepts and beliefs so as not to replicate the patterns of repression and subjugation we notice in the traditional conceptual frameworks?” (Mohanty 1989, 4). The answer was to emphasize difference as the only way to counter the colonialist logics that had subsumed humanity within their own worldviews. This theoretical framework argued that we could understand human beings only by situating them in their particular social and cultural contexts. As Satya Mohanty has pointed out, “very generally understood, this development underscored the need to define the claims of difference over identity. . . . Against the Enlightenment’s emphasis on a singular rationality underlying and comprehending all human activities, relativism pursued the possibilities of change, variety

and difference, and began thereby to pose the question of otherness” (1989, 2). The poststructuralist condition, then, emphasized discontinuity in human experience and celebrated difference, plurality, and heterogeneity over and against the supposedly reductive unities underlying human experience. Given this history, a humanism that insists on commonality rather than difference is still regarded, at best, as critically naïve and flawed, and at worst as dangerous. Following from this, human rights discourses that arise out of any kind of universalism have been seen as always-already implicated in the unequal workings of power.

Building on Immanuel Wallerstein, who argues for a genuine universalism (“universal universalism”) to replace the ideological force of “European universalism,” I resist the dismissal of universalisms altogether (Wallerstein 2006, xii). I argue that there is nothing inherent within universalizing discourses that leads to their inevitable co-option by power. Critics such as Cheah support their argument that the “universal human” should be abandoned by claiming that the “arbitrariness of its signs” results in their unavoidable conquest by hegemonic units, producing radical differences in its social use (Cheah 2007, 9). However, all linguistic meanings, not just that of the “universal human,” change according to differing social contexts and can be harnessed towards questionable ends. Since the solution is obviously not to abandon language per se, the real question that emerges is: does the term ‘human’ *completely* cease to refer to any common or ‘universal’ idea when socially contingent meanings are attached to it in varying ways and in different contexts? Shared discourses, I suggest, do amount to some level of shared meaning, which gestures towards an acceptance of what constitutes the “universal human.” In doing so, they indicate that the figure of the universal human lies outside instrumental relations, serving as a regulative ideal that is nevertheless subject to being shaped by contextual particulars; one may use this regulative ideal to criticize different actors for *misusing* the idea of the “universal human” for their own ends, rather than claim, as Cheah does, that a concept like ‘humanity’ is always-already contaminated by the force field within which it is invoked. If one claims, then, that the problem is not with universalizing discourses themselves, but their insidious use by particular powerful communities, another question arises: how can one deploy a universalizing humanism within which the oppressed can rediscover their humanity without subsuming the particulars of their experience? This question was a central concern for writers of the Black Consciousness and Black Arts movements in the 1960s and 1970s.

EMANCIPATION THROUGH PARTICULARS OR UNIVERSALS?

Global movements for black emancipation in the 1960s and 1970s saw broad disagreements about how to define particulars of ‘blackness’ while staking a claim to a broader humanity. Poets and thinkers asked: how do we retain the ‘human’ while preventing its contamination by the pervasive discourses and assumptions of white supremacy? What would such a ‘human’ look like? What kinds of particulars would make up this emancipated human? These were quest-

ions that gave rise to a rich intertextuality amongst global thinkers, marked by points of agreement and contention. For instance, the Black Consciousness movement was a grassroots anti-apartheid movement led by black intellectual Steve Biko that emerged in South Africa in the mid-1960s and emphasized the need to reclaim a black identity within a larger humanity. He insisted on the necessity for black people to begin thinking of themselves as humans (Biko 1986, 103-104) while simultaneously asserting that “a sincere attempt should be made at emphasizing the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by themselves. . . . In essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African” (Biko 1987, 40).³

While taking up the same question of grounding black identity for emancipation, other thinkers took divergent positions. Some reconciled the tension between the universal and particular by doing away with the universal human altogether, insisting on the fundamental differences that defined blackness. For Gwendolyn Brooks, a key figure of the Black Arts movement, ‘humanity’ was predominantly an abstraction to which blacks would be denied access. In 1971, she therefore wrote that “there is not, and should not be, black obsession with universality now; that differences, distinctions need to be yanked forward now, yanked forward and really looked at, and newly judged respectable and deliciously actual” (Kgositsile 1971, 11). Brooks, then, formulated a black identity through the making respectable of ‘black qualities’ that had previously been judged uncivilized and inferior by the white majority. She insisted on a black essence that could be quantified and celebrated through demands for respect.

The question of whether to ground black identity in difference or commonalities can also be located as an evolving trope in the work of Black Arts poet Everett LeRoi Jones. In 1967 at the height of the Black Arts period, Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka in an attempt to return to a ‘genuine’ African heritage. This desire for return was also voiced in his poetry, for example in “Ka ’Ba” included in his 1969 volume *Black Magic*:

We are beautiful people
 With African imaginations
 full of masks and dances and swelling chants
 with African eyes, and noses, and arms
 tho we sprawl in gray chains in a place
 full of winters, when what we want is sun.

We have been captured,
 and we labor to make our getaway, into
 the ancient image; into a new

Correspondence with ourselves
 and our Black family. We need magic
 now we need the spells, to raise up
 return, destroy, and create. What will be
 the sacred word? (Baraka 1991, 222)

The poem contains a number of references to a particular and ‘authentic’ Muslim and African heritage. Baraka asserts that black Americans have an intrinsic connection to the African continent; they therefore yearn for sun and have tribal roots and cultures full of “masks and dances and swelling chants.” This Orientalist image of Africa is supplemented by another stereotype of it as a place of exotic magic and mystery grounded in the “sacred word” of Islamic prayer. Furthermore, the Africa Baraka talks of is “ancient,” stuck in time, and a return to that static temporality will enable African Americans to renew themselves. Baraka, then, conflates biological race, “African eyes, and noses, and arms,” with a fundamental African identity that repeats many common Orientalist stereotypes about Africa and Muslims.

However, Baraka’s viewpoint veered inconsistently between a racial essentialism and a more flexible conception of black identity. In an earlier poem, “Notes for a Speech,” he speaks of a cultural nationalism that insists on reified particulars at the expense of universalism as a static and regressive way of achieving black empowerment. Here Jones/Baraka conceives of African-American connections with the African ‘homeland’ in very different terms:

African blues
 does not know me . . .
 Does
 not feel
 what I am.

My color
 is not theirs. Lighter, white man
 talk. They shy away. My own
 dead souls, my, so called
 people. Africa
 is a foreign place. You are
 as any other sad man here
 American. (Baraka 1991, 14-15)

The poem contains a deep recognition that racial connection is not the same thing as cultural connection. The latter is a much more important basis for identity because rather than being predetermined, cultural connections are ever changing and based on the sum of one’s experiences. Here Jones/Baraka states that Africa “does not feel what I am”; it is an alien country because the poet himself has not been formed by it in any meaningful sense. This is also why Africans do not take a sense of connection with the poet for granted: “They shy away” (15). Jones/Baraka therefore refers to Africans not as his people but as his “so called people” and proclaims Africa “a foreign place”; its people are not substantively of the same community or identity category. Finally, Baraka negates the equation of race with cultural identity in one metaphorical stroke: “My color is not theirs” (15). People cannot be pigeonholed into identity stereotypes based on the color of their skin. The differences in cultural heritage between Africans and African Americans overwhelms any sense of racial connection except for when

it is grounded in shared experience. The poem points out what certain strands of cultural nationalism of the Black Arts movement overlooked: that the experiences that shape a person far outweigh any *pre-given* biological identity category formulated independently of experience. To think otherwise is to replicate the colonialist and racist logic that justified segregation in the first place. Rather than grounding people in their contexts while insisting on commonalities based on shared experience, such an emphasis on black difference commits the same kind of reifying move of which universalism is often accused.

A UNIVERSALIZING HUMANISM COMPOSED OF PARTICULARS: KGOSITSILE AND THE POETICS OF LIMINALITY

Kgositsile was also grappling with grounding the particulars of black identity in a universal horizon of humanity. Located in the transnational marginality of exile, in the multiple particulars of South African and African-American experience, Kgositsile incorporates a vision of a collective humanity made up of particular yet shared lived experiences. This perspective no doubt came out of his unique liminality; he is a poet and political activist who became an influential member of the African National Congress in the 1960s and 1970s. Because of his political involvement in the anti-apartheid movement, Kgositsile was exiled to the US from 1962 to 1975. There, he studied African-American literature and culture extensively and became a leading figure among African-American poets of the Black Arts movement. Kgositsile reached the conclusion that, instead of hearkening back to a reified particular in the shape of a homeland or identity, the whole world needed to be claimed as a home made up of multiple particulars. Unsurprisingly, such a vision of a collective humanity expressed from marginal positions can, in fact, be traced in African-American writers such as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston, who also all spent significant time abroad.⁴ For Kgositsile and these other liminal figures, forced to inhabit multiple selves and locations simultaneously, blacks needed to recognize themselves as part of a transnational humanity theorized through an emphasis on particular yet common experiences.

In line with this vision, Kgositsile saw the sole reliance on either an abstract humanity or a set of cultural particulars as equally problematic grounds for black emancipation. In an interview he therefore claimed that “humanity is a tricky abstraction. . . . Wright’s later works suffered because he became concerned with ‘humanity’ instead of, specifically, black people” (Kgositsile 1968b, 18). Yet, when it came to a sole focus on the specificity of black experience, he was equally critical. In a May 1968 article from *Black World/Negro Digest* called “Africans and Afro-Americans: Toward Our Freedom,” Kgositsile wrote that while cultural essentialism was an important tool with which the black self could be “deniggerified, demystified . . . we must clearly understand that the questions of identity and nationalism are, even at their utmost best, a means not an end, a good beginning.” He insists, then, that “the question of identity among Afro-Americans is

of primary importance as a first step towards liberatory struggle. Identity and nationalism are simply strategic points of reference in our struggle for liberation” (Kgositsile 1968a, 25).⁶ While cultural nationalism was to be the grounds through which black self-respect could be reclaimed, it was necessary to move beyond these grounds to launch a struggle for justice, focusing instead on universalizing transnational commonalities based in the particulars of shared experiences.

In another article in *Black World/Negro Digest* published in the late 1960s, Kgositsile elaborates on a similar formulation. He insists that black writers must focus on including their particular experiences as black individuals into their work. They need to establish a “black aesthetic,” for “the point of view of Black writers is black, and their experience as Black people colors their ethics and aesthetics, if they are honest people” (Kgositsile 1968b, 18). He simultaneously notes, however, that these particulars are part of a collective shared experience:

Vision, no matter how individual or exceptional it might be labeled by some literary hustler, is always connected with a specific world view that exists in spite of the writer, the thinker, or any other individual channel through which it is expressed. All it means is that whoever it is has dipped into some collective reservoir, come out inspired enough to isolate some aspect of our existence, and explores it or sings its connectedness—past, present, or future—to the collected or collective desire, purpose, wisdom, values. (Kgositsile 1972, 44)

Black experiences of global oppression are here connected to each other, giving rise to a shared worldview formed from accumulated but selected “aspect[s] of our existence.” Kgositsile thus incorporates a non-essentialist vision of black particulars within a “collective reservoir” formed through black structures of feeling. This non-hegemonic articulation of universality, rather than an institutionalized rights discourse, lies at the center of Kgositsile’s struggles for black emancipation.

This theorization was formulated through a particular aesthetics. And this “black aesthetic” is expressed through a poetics that performs Kgositsile’s constantly growing universalism, composed of particular black lived experiences. If, as Joseph Slaughter has argued, the linear bildungsroman form buttresses the authority of international law, naturalizing its dictates in the cultural consciousness of colonizing and colonized subjects by performing the acculturation of the liberal-humanist subject (2007, 107), the poetic form as Kgositsile harnesses it can be seen as doing the opposite. Kgositsile’s poetics registers a liminal unboundedness that can work in the service of an open-ended universal human made up of particulars. A free-verse poetics is particularly suited to expressing a nonlinear, visceral record of black suffering toward the ends of a constantly growing universalism. Kgositsile’s poetic form builds an inventory of particular lived experiences, forming an evolving horizon of humanity that cannot be easily co-opted by the ends of power precisely because it is lived and felt within each individual.

Kgositsile’s poetic form thus crafts a shifting, open-ended definition of the human that is grounded in a transnational identity. During his exile, Kgositsile

grappled with the problem of representing Africa in relation to America and Africans in relation to African-Americans. As a South African black man in America, Kgositsile is aware that the Africa of which Black Arts poets wrote in such essentialized, idealized terms was a place of oppression just like America. He therefore resists the characterization of Africa as the place of origins to which all blacks belong. He offers another vision of Africa not as an essentialist category but as “Afrika”—a historical place that refuses to encompass or subsume all of black humanity within its stereotypes:

Afrika! The memory that lingers
 across the hovering womb
 of my desire at dawn.
 Africa, the stench of absence
 Afrika, the fragrance of rebirth. (Alvarez-Péreyre 1984, 47)

“Afrika” is the South African, Afrikaans language name for Africa. Kgositsile deliberately uses this word to displace the essentialized “Africa” of some African-American thinkers. As Natalie Margo Crawford puts it, Kgositsile “depicts the flickering, new sign ‘Afrika’ with which the speaker must continue to try to overshadow the lingering, entrenched sign ‘Africa’” (2007, 116). He portrays this as a liberating move, one linked to “rebirth” rather than absence. “Africa” needs to be replaced, for it can only signify absence; it no longer exists for a colonized South African and never genuinely existed at all for African Americans who did not live there. This, then, is a displacement of the metaphorical claims on “Africa” being made by Garveyites, who claimed the continent for progressive purposes, attempting to refigure the stigma associated with it in colonialist discourses (Kelley 2003, 27, 29, 68).⁷ For Kgositsile, Africa was more productively to be claimed and defined by those who had lived experiences there. At the same time, this is also a displacing move against the colonial Afrikaner ownership of “Afrika.” Even though “Afrika” is an Afrikaans word for a country then owned by Afrikaans-speaking whites, Kgositsile recognized the signifier as intimately linked to his being: for it is not an unchanging, transcendent “Africa” but the “Afrika” of the colonizers that is tied to his experiences and that must be reclaimed as home. Importantly, the desire for “Afrika” and displacement of “Africa” is visceral, emphasizing the lived rather than theorized nature of this identity. The desire for “Afrika” is immediate and sexual, appearing at dawn within an imagined womb where identity can be reborn. In contrast to this rebirth and this new life, “Africa” carries the stench of a rotting corpse. Kgositsile’s poetics allows him to emphasize lived, felt, embodied particulars of identity.

While resisting the essentialization of “Africa,” Kgositsile’s other poems offer a universal, transnational ‘home’ for blacks based on common experiences. Africa and America, Africans and African-Americans, are compared to each other only on the basis of their common suffering. Thus rather than seeing identity as a category that transcends lived experience, Kgositsile posits a common humanity based on the shared sufferings of the black body. The latter exists in diverse geographical locations defined by the colonizer’s maps of geopolitical power. For

Kgositsile, the places are different, but shared experiences within these places transcend the colonizer's borderlines and versions of history:

You could say you were from Cape Town
 Johannesburg Accra Bagamoyo
 New York Kingston Havana
 When you have come from tomorrow
 We shall know each other by our bloodstains. (Kgositsile 1995, 63)

The poem does not differentiate the urban centers of black experience, but instead builds a constantly growing, unbounded list of names that announce the unity of black suffering through a lack of commas; whether in South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, the US, Jamaica, or Cuba, these centers are united by the common "bloodstains" of racial oppression. Kgositsile's poetics presents a universalizing discourse that exists in between, within, and outside these places, all rendered as one through shared particulars.

Other poems also stress the need to emphasize commonalities based in black suffering rather than in some myth of racial origin, such as "For Eusi, Ayi Kwei, & Gwen Brooks":

We move from origin
 The singular fruit at times bitter
 As the Sophiatown winters we did not create
 To roots stronger than the grief
 Which groans under the weighted
 Centuries of systematic rape and ruin. (Kgositsile 1971, 73)

The poem suggests that to overcome the grief of "centuries of systematic rape and ruin" black people need to move past "origin" to the "roots" they share. Kgositsile indicates here that the word "origin" is too simplistic, suggesting a place where one is born but did not live or where one's ancestors were from. The word "roots," on the other hand, implies only those origins that have shaped one's own identity, incisively referring to those experiences in which one is rooted. Such a distinction is pertinent in light of Kgositsile's reference to Sophiatown, a legendary black cultural hub in Johannesburg that was destroyed under apartheid and rebuilt for whites. It was one of the oldest black areas in Johannesburg and an epicenter of politics, music, and art that produced some of South Africa's most famous writers, musicians, politicians, and artists. Its destruction represents some of the criminal excesses of South Africa under apartheid. In his allusion to Sophiatown, Kgositsile suggests the tenuous nature of a reliance on an "origin" that is "singular," for black origins are never unitary; not only do black populations originate from multiple gene pools, these origins have also been constantly changed and destroyed according to white whims. Instead, Kgositsile implies that a reliance on "roots" is more appropriate; the "roots" that black people have in common as a result of racial oppression need to be embraced in order to move past the "anger and sorrow" of "Sophiatown winters." This, then, is a rooting of black identity in shared experiences and sufferings.

Kgositsile also emphasizes the necessary distinction between “roots” and “origin[s]” and the preference for the former as a theoretical lens in his descriptions of returning home to his own place of “origin” after years of exile in the US. He realizes that his origins have been rendered meaningless; he is unable to recognize, relate to, or know his physical surroundings:

There are no memories here. The streets of Johannesburg cannot claim me. I cannot claim them either. Their names . . . remain, but it seems there is not much more than that for the returning one after ages and ages. . . . Even at a very physical level, you cannot—or should I say—you should not destroy everything which connects people to history, to certain memories, to certain places, to memorial reference points. . . . Even at a very physical level, you destroy those physical points of reference, you destroy the individual, the compatriot, the son or daughter returning “home.” (Kgositsile 1991, 6)

Kgositsile recounts how during his enforced exile, Johannesburg has become nothing but “origin[s]” in the abstract sense. His rootedness in Johannesburg through lived experience has been taken away from him. The reservoir of memories, of physical points of reference that made up his identity as an “individual” and a “compatriot,” no longer exists. “Home,” then, is no longer home, a word made ironic by the use of quotation marks. What is home, Kgositsile suggests, is where his lived experiences are.⁸ Home for Kgositsile, then, is necessarily transnational, liminal, and multiple, and anchored in lived experience.

In “For Eusi, Ayi Kwei, & Gwen Brooks,” Kgositsile also bases such an assertion of commonality over reified difference through a universalizing notion of humanity that does not differentiate people based on skin color:

We move from origin to roots
Past the rancid face of anger and sorrow
Where I was a stranger to my breath
There rests the colour of my eye
Calling my name
Where the spirit moves on to
The darkneses the eye caresses
In us and into us and ours. (Kgositsile 1971, 73)

Kgositsile suggests that drowning in “anger and sorrow” for too long alienates one from oneself: “Past the rancid face of anger and sorrow / Where I was a stranger to my breath.” To become comfortable in one’s own skin and with one’s own “breath,” one must eventually “move from origin to roots,” which involves a deep recognition of the “colour of my eye.” The eye, here, functions as a symbol of universal humanity and common purpose. In an article for *Black World/Negro Digest* in which Kgositsile interviewed a Brazilian playwright, he pointed to the significance of the eyes to record the truths of common experience: “The language we speak, the language of solidarity and brotherhood, our spirit, claws its way out of the depths of our purposes through our eyes. We shake hands again, hug. Brother meets brother—all barriers gone” (Kgositsile 1969, 43). The word “caresses” in “For Eusi, Ayi Kwei, & Gwen Brooks” suggests that this is a positive,

affirming, and tender basis for identity rather than an alienating one (Kgositsile 1971, 73). A focus on eye rather than skin color shifts the paradigm from ‘us vs. them’ to “in us and into us and ours,” the repeated “ands” and vowel sounds building a fluid, evolving, and unbounded sense of collective identity. The word “ours” used in this context is an assertion that what is “ours” applies similarly to all black people who undergo racial oppression (73).

For Kgositsile, then, blackness is an open-ended signifier based on experience and suffering rather than a fixed indication of reified origin. This is perhaps most clearly suggested in his poem “When Brown is Black,” a title that implies that ‘blackness’ as an identity category has little to do with actual skin color and more to do with perceived commonalities (and differences): for all ‘black’ people in actuality are not black; they have brown skin of differing shades. And all ‘brown’ men regardless of their shade of ‘brownness’ are perceived as sharing black qualities by whites, and are therefore united in their experiences of racial oppression.

For Malcolm
 For the brothers in Robben Island
 For every drop of Black blood
 From every white whip
 From every white gun and bomb
 For us and again for us
 We shall burn
 And beat the drum
 Resounding the bloodsong
 From Sharpeville to Watts
 And all points white of the memory
 When the white game is over
 And we dance to our bloodsong. (Kgositsile 1971, 77)

In this poem, Kgositsile builds the grounds for a black identity based on shared experiences by delineating the similarities between common oppressions: he compares African American activist Malcolm X, who developed his political consciousness in prison and was assassinated shortly after he embraced a transnational political agenda, to those of the prisoners in the South African prison on Robben Island, where anti-apartheid activists such as Nelson Mandela were held for decades. Similarly, Kgositsile compares the massacre in the South African township of Sharpeville in 1960 to the Watts Riots in Los Angeles in 1965. In both places, black protestors challenged racist segregationist policies and were brutally suppressed by police. In both cases there were tens of deaths and many hundreds injured. Kgositsile’s point is that blackness is to be defined in its formation through common oppressions, not in terms of essentialisms. Thus even when Kgositsile defines blackness in opposition to whiteness, it is mainly in recognition of the binary through which racial oppression has been conceptualized and instrumentalized on black bodies. Weapons of torture used against blacks are therefore “white”: “white whips, white gun and bomb.” Kgositsile speaks of a day when this “white game will be over,” claiming it as a day when blacks will

“dance to our bloodsong” and “beat the drum.” At first glance this sounds like Négritude’s suggestion of blackness’s inherent ties to rhythm, in turn linked to the evocation of the beating of tribal African drums. However, the song here is not one full of primordial African essences; it is a “bloodsong.” In other words, it is a song built on “every drop of Black blood” that has flowed forth from the concrete experience of black suffering (Kgositsile 1971, 77).

In his more recent post-apartheid poems, Kgositsile uses the metaphor of “blood” again to describe the common experiences of suffering wrought by global capital. In a poem dedicated to anti-apartheid activists such as Radithupa Edwin Mabitse, Kgositsile proclaims:

Your passage through here
 teaches us weight of mission
 teaches us slime of promise
 from mouth greased with stench
 of crimson dollar or rand
 or whatever currency demands
 floods of your blood
 all over this land (Kgositsile 2004, 34).

The poem condemns neoliberal economics, describing the dollar and rand as “crimson” and drenched in “floods of your blood.” This is because their use as tools of oppression in the hands of multinational corporations constitutes a betrayal of the black emancipation for which anti-apartheid activists such as Mabitse fought. Kgositsile thus challenges institutions in South Africa that oppress poor and working-class South Africans despite Black Economic Empowerment schemes. Because Kgositsile does not frame the idea of “Black blood” as a racial essence, he can wield it to describe the concrete sufferings of black people even in an age of black diamonds. Kgositsile, then, appropriates the signifier ‘black’ for his own ends and asserts that blackness may indicate a shared heritage of common experiences rather than a reified identity of the kind easily appropriated by ideologies of racial oppression or black cultural nationalism.

Kgositsile, then, retains a recognizable universalizing discourse of the ‘human’ but directed toward emancipatory ends rather than toward the ends of power. In doing so, his poetry lends weight to Slaughter’s suggestion that the universal idea of the human in literary discourses can offer modes of resistance to colonized subjects. While the revolutionary rights rhetoric of liberty, equality, and fraternity in the bildungsroman obscures the character of its implementation in “practices and discourses bearing new forms of inequality” (Slaughter 2007, 5), such discourses can be appropriated by historically marginalized subjects through other, more flexible literary forms. Kgositsile’s formulation of such a discourse as a strategy of resistance to black oppression is, then, just such a “nonhegemonic rearticulation of universality” (2007, 5).

TOWARDS A CONTEXTUALLY GROUNDED UNIVERSALIZING HUMANISM

Kgositsile's open-ended, transnational vision of black humanity rooted in common experiences was affirmed by other global black poets. Martinique's anticolonial activist Aimé Césaire coined the term "Négritude" but refused to see it as an ideology of essentializing relativisms. As Michael V. Angrosino notes, Césaire's Négritude contained three main principles: "First, there was his personal identification with blacks everywhere and with their heritage of slavery. Second, there was his rejection of white civilization, because it was the progenitor of slavery and racism. Third, there was his hope for a future of universal fraternity" (1989, 124). As Césaire explained: "I'm not going to entomb myself in some strait particularism. But I don't intend either to become lost in a fleshless universalism. . . . I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all" (1957, 15). Here, Césaire advocates a contextualized universalism. This theological and ontological perspective involves an awareness of the commonalities that ground human experience while also understanding how these commonalities are found and expressed in contextual particulars. It is only this position that will capture the struggles of a living, breathing, in-the-flesh people in opposition to a cultural nationalism that "entombs" black people by freezing them in time, binding them in a "strait" jacket of a limited cultural identity, just as colonialism and slavery did. In Césaire's vision, the particulars of human identity, whether black or brown or white, in America, Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, or Africa, must be the basis on which a struggle for social justice is built. These particulars must be combined to produce a universal humanity, one that is neither elided into a "fleshless universalism" nor exaggerated into an essentializing cultural relativism.

This is also apparent in one of Amiri Baraka's later poems, "In the Tradition," first published in 1980. In this beautiful work, Baraka seems to have resolved his earlier tensions between a black cultural nationalism and a progressive universalism. He echoes Césaire's words, asserting a similar universalizing humanism composed of contextualized particulars:

when we remember
 when we are our memory as the projection
 of what it is evolving
 in struggle
 in passion and pain
 we become our sweet black
 selves

once again,
 in the tradition
 in the African American
 tradition
 open us
 yet bind us

let all that is positive
 find
 us
 we go into the future
 carrying a world
 of blackness
 yet we have been in the world
 and we have gained all of what there
 is and was, since the highest expression
 of the world, is its total

 & the universal
 is the entire collection
 of particulars

 ours is one particular
 one tradition
 of love and suffering truth over lies
 and now we find ourselves in chains
 the tradition says plainly to us fight plainly to us
 fight, that's in it, clearly, we are not meant to be slaves
 (Baraka 1991, 309-10)

This powerful poem grounds black identity in shared “particulars” of experience, in the “struggle” African Americans have endured rather than in essentialisms. Baraka echoes Césaire’s words: “a world / of blackness” exists and is articulated in the concrete particulars of black experience, which form an empowering “tradition” of their own. A universal horizon of humanity must be constructed out of these particulars of black experience, for “the universal is the entire collection of particulars.” The importance of this statement is highlighted through its placement within a stanza of its own. It proudly asserts that a horizon of shared universal humanity grounds the fight against slavery, against the “lies” and the “chains” that bind black people.

South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile, Caribbean intellectual Aime Césaire, and later Amiri Baraka, all living at the height of racial oppression, grappled with the claims of difference but, instead, ended up stressing a commonality based on lived experiences. These thinkers recognized that while cultural nationalisms carried out a much-needed celebration of cultural sovereignty, such a paradigm was only a first step towards liberation. The next had necessarily to involve a non-hegemonic, liminal, and open-ended universalism that insisted on shared experiences making up a collective horizon of humanity. They therefore laid emphasis on the commonalities that underpin human life and ethics through unofficial discourses of the human that did not carry the weight of the nation-state behind them. They achieved this through a flexible poetics of accumulating particulars that could be directed against power instead of being co-opted by it.

NOTES

- ¹ See Stuart Hall's article "When Was 'the Post-Colonial?'" in which he describes how, before the eighteenth century, difference had been conceptualized according to multiple ontological orders. Enlightenment humanism, meanwhile, conceptualized the single ontological order of human civilization, classifying the human on an evolutionary scale from least (black man) to most (white man) developed (Hall 1996, 252).
- ² *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate* offers a discussion of precisely this question (Chomsky and Foucault 2006). Chomsky argues for a universal human nature as guiding the construction of an ethical, social, and political sphere, while Foucault sees the 'universal human' as itself always-already contaminated by relations of power.
- ³ For more on Biko's role in the Black Consciousness movement, see Steve Biko and Millard Arnold 1979. This text contains Biko's testimony on the behalf of nine black people arrested in 1976 for having thoughts unacceptable to the regime. Biko called for the psychological and cultural liberation of the black mind as a precondition to political freedom.
- ⁴ It is not surprising, then, that in an interview, Kgositsile stated that his consciousness of race and ideas of black rights were formed in an intertextual, transnational context; even before his exile, he read works by African Americans, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, while in South Africa. He states: "I used to spend a lot of time at the United States Information Service Office [in Johannesburg]. There was a library there. It was curious. They had most of Langston Hughes' work. . . . In the early sixties they got some James Baldwin and Frank Yerby. Those of us who were trying to find black literary models spent a lot of time in that library. There is a fellow, a journalist and short story writer Casey Motsisi, who has been writing since the fifties, creating characters like Langston Hughes. Simple—in that style too. Also, I would say that the connection or closeness of black people here and black people in South Africa has been in existence longer than it has been made public" (quoted in Rowell 1978, 28).
- ⁵ Kgositsile also explains the affective power of black cultural nationalism in this article, writing that "in order for racial domination to be successful, the racist oppressor had to create in us self-doubt and feelings of insecurity. . . . When we understand this contradiction, we will be better able to understand why the liberation struggle in Africa mobilizes the people by awakening nationalist passions and why Afro Americans rally around identity" (1968a, 25).
- ⁶ Kgositsile here anticipates and critiques Spivak's delineation of "strategic essentialism." See her essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," which argues that essentialism is negative not in its essence but in its application. It can, when judiciously applied, be effective in dismantling unwanted structures or alleviating suffering, although when it is uncritically employed it is destructive. Ultimately, however, Kgositsile recognizes that "strategic essentialism" may be hounded by the very binary thinking it seeks to oppose, for it evades the complexities involved in the ways people engage with their own selves, societies, histories, and bodies.
- ⁷ See Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* for a version of Garveyism that goes in this direction.
- ⁸ In conceptualizing black experience in this manner, Kgositsile participates in the tradition of African Americans who have also challenged the myths of Afrocentric identity: famously, the poet Countee Cullen, for example in "Heritage" (Parini 1995, 485), and Alice Walker, in "Everyday Use" (Walker 1994).

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