

FROM HARLEM TO ALGIERS

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

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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